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Perceptions of Higher Education Online Students and Faculty Regarding Attrition in Online Courses

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
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Abstract

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Online Courses

by

Maria A. Parnell

MA, The College of New Rochelle, 1989

BS, State University of New York at New Paltz, 1983

Project Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

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Abstract

At a large, public, 4-year college in the United States, the attrition rate for students taking online classes is 10% greater than for those taking face-to-face classes. Although the college ranks among the top in graduation rates both statewide and nationally, the research problem was the gap in attrition rates between online and face-to-face students. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore online faculty and online student perspectives regarding why students drop out of online courses at one state college and what recommendations they have for improving retention in online courses. Tinto's model of institutional departure served as the conceptual framework, with data collection consisting of Microsoft Teams semistructured interviews with five online faculty and six online student participants. The interview data were coded leading to nine emerging themes, including the skill level of the online student, time management, communication between the faculty member and student, course content, course design, and external factors impacting the online student. The results indicated that online learners drop out of online courses for reasons, such as family issues, lack of communication between the faculty member and the student, lack of time management skills, and lack of knowledge as to what is required in an online course. The recommendations for improving online student retention will be shared with online faculty in a professional development training. The professional development may provide a positive social change in which more online students persist, are retained, and graduate with their degree, resulting in them becoming employed in better paying careers and have a lasting impact on support to their local community.

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Dedication

I thank God for all of his blessings and for helping me through this doctoral process. It has been an arduous and challenging task and could not have been accomplished without God's guidance. There were many grueling setbacks, yet God sustained me throughout it all. To my children, Alexander and Eric, you are my inspiration and I appreciate your support. Also, to my sisters, Carol and Evelyn, thank you for your support. I am grateful for all of the encouragement I received from my friends, family, and colleagues. Special thanks to Dr. Linda Swanson, Dr. Glenn Penny, Dr. Carole Pearce and Dr. Sherry Harrison for your guidance and for putting me on track to graduate. Finally, and above all, I thank my chair, Dr. Sydney Parent, for her many enduring lessons and for giving me the vision to see the light at the end of the tunnel. I truly believe God placed you at the end of this process so I could recognize and benefit from your excellence. Thank you for your time, energy, and support.

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Section 1: The Problem

The Local Problem

In this era of technology, distance learning helps to meet the various needs of adults around the world who may not be able to attend college in person. Online learning allows students the opportunity to complete courses and entire degree programs without ever entering a traditional, face-to-face classroom. Advancements in technology have led to the implementation of online courses at many colleges and universities (Khechine & Lakhal, 2018). In the fall of 2018, there were over 5 million undergraduate students enrolled in online courses (Hussar et al., 2020). Furthermore, of the 5.7 million students participating in online education, approximately 2.3 million of the students were enrolled exclusively online (Hussar et al., 2020). In addition, according to the 2016 Babson Survey Research Group's (2018) *Online Report Card—Tracking Online Education in the United States* more than 1 in 4 students were taking at least one distance education course, with over 3 million students taking all their courses through distance education.

Although higher education has evolved in the development and offerings of online courses, according to Sekendiz (2018), online courses have not been without challenges and controversy. One challenge of online education has been high attrition rates (McKinney et al., 2019; Sekendiz, 2018). Additionally, student success rates, which refer to the completion of online courses, are lower than in face-to-face courses (Simplicio, 2019). Research results have shown that there is a 10% to 20% higher failure rate in online courses than for face-to-face courses (Bawa, 2016). Students are not only dropping out of online classes but are also abandoning online programs, resulting in

lower retention rates for students enrolled in online courses than for students in face-to-face courses (Simplicio, 2019).

Tinto (1982) analyzed undergraduate degree completion rates from 1880–1980 and stated, "Rates of dropout from higher education have remained strikingly constant over the past 100 years" (p. 694). Tinto observed that students were dropping out at a rate of 45%, and the rate did not shift much over time. Now decades after Tinto's study, the problem of retention persists in higher education, and it is even more of a concern with online learning (Rose & Moore, 2019).

Reducing withdrawal rates and increasing the success rate (i.e., grade of A, B, C versus unsuccessful grade = D or F) of online course completion has been a major concern at the study site. For the purposes of this study, success constitutes a grade of C or better in the course. As with withdrawal rates, researchers reported that successful course completion is lower in online class sections than in traditional, face-to-face courses (Hart et al., 2015). According to Levy (2017), students involved in a study of the Washington state university and community college system who took an online class had a 7% less chance of persisting than their peers who took only face-to-face classes. The result is that students fail to achieve their academic and career goals, and the university in turn experiences declining persistence rates (Simplicio, 2019).

The research problem in this study was a gap in attrition rates between online and face-to-face students. The study site is a large, public, 4-year college that has more than 15,000 students taking classes each year at one of the four brick-and-mortar campuses or online towards attaining certificates, associate's, or bachelor's degrees. The college's

diverse student body is made up of high school graduates, business professionals, and people who are university-bound, seeking new careers. Although the college ranks among the top in graduation rates both statewide and nationally, a gap in practice exists between online and face-to-face student attrition. As documented in a 2019 internal report, the attrition rate in online courses is 26% compared to 19% in face-to-face classes. These rates represent a 6-year period, beginning in 2013.

As of 2019, higher attrition rates have continued to be a concern among both administrators and faculty. An administrator at the study site stated that like state and national trends, the college has the same challenges to support and improve success in online courses. Much of the difference in success rates in online and face-to-face courses can be attributed to withdrawals from courses prior to the end of term. The administrator explained that the online withdrawal rate is about 18% compared to about 10% for face-to-face courses. The administrator went on to state that withdrawing from any format of a general education course will certainly increase the risk of not completing a general education requirement within the first year, and many of the online courses fulfill the general education requirement for graduation.

At the study site, a faculty member who has been teaching both face-to-face and online platforms for over 20 years has watched online learning evolve. They observed that attrition rates in the online classes exceeded attrition in face-to-face classes by at least 10% to 15%. Furthermore, another faculty member who has taught online and face-to-face courses since 2012 shared similar observations. This faculty member observed the loss of approximately six students per online class to self-withdrawal, nonattendance

instructor withdrawal, and receiving nonpassing final grades, but only loses about four students in a face-to-face section. The faculty member continued by saying that faculty members teaching in online platforms who have seen course attrition rates higher than in their face-to-face classes have not addressed attrition directly because this problem seemed bigger than the individual instructor. Furthermore, another college administrator indicated that there was a lower pass rate among online students compared to face-to-face courses, and there was a need for strategies that might narrow that gap in graduation attrition.

Rationale

The convenience of online learning has transformed traditional academia, generating a shift away from brick-and-mortar classroom enrollment for millennial students (Stocker, 2018). A 2018 national report stated, in the fall of 2015, 337,000 undergraduates were enrolled in at least one online course, which increased by the fall of 2016 to 6,359,121 undergraduates taking online courses (Seaman et al., 2018). The study noted a progressive growth in the number of online courses taken each year: 3.4% in 2013; 3.3% in 2014; 3.9% in 2015; and in 2016, it peaked at 5.6% (Seaman et al., 2018). This has made attrition one of the challenges for online degree programs.

The topic of online course effectiveness is central to several university administrative conversations because of the opportunities available to students and the expected revenue from online education (Hill, 2016). There is minimal research that examines online education outcomes, such as persistence, attrition, and attainment of college credentials. Despite the increasing number of enrollments, improvements in

delivery methods and design, and increased acceptance of online learning, institutions remain burdened with higher attrition rates in distance learning than with students in traditional classes (Radovan, 2019). Radovan (2019) stated that the dropout rate from education is a serious problem and a multidimensional phenomenon, both on a systemic and personal level. Radovan's findings suggest that in addition to the financial costs of the dropout rate there are also emotional consequences for the students discontinuing their education.

In the past, researchers have studied large samples of online students in state systems (Jaggars & Xu, 2016). Jaggars and Xu (2016) analyzed data from approximately 24,000 students in 23 institutions in the Virginia Community College system. The results showed that students more frequently failed or withdrew from online courses than face-to-face courses. Jaggars and Xu also found that students who enrolled in online coursework during the first few terms in college were less likely to be retained the following semesters, and students who took several online courses during a term were less likely to obtain a degree from that institution.

The administration at the study site's state system level recognized the benefits and problems of online learning. Their strategic plan for 2018–2020 included the importance of expanding online access and improving the pass and completion rates. According to an administrator, to address the issue of online attrition at the study site, the administration and faculty created objectives and action steps within the 2019–2023 strategic plan for specific policies and programs to support the improvement of academic performance. The plan focused on raising the quality of online instruction and improving

retention and completion rates. An administrator at the study site shared that the strategic plan includes the following goals:

1. Improving student learning and emphasizing professional development for full-time and adjunct faculty.

2. Raising the quality of online instruction and course and curriculum design.

3. Improving retention and completion rates, using Florida College System metrics to set benchmarks, with the objective of excelling in performance-based funding at the college.

Each goal was to be investigated by an assigned team. According to an administrator at the study site, addressing these goals is a priority at the college to improve student retention and increase student success rates in online courses. The purpose of this study was to explore online faculty and online student perspectives regarding why students drop out of online courses at one state college and what recommendations online faculty and online students have for improving retention in online courses.

Definition of Terms

Attrition: When the student withdraws from a program or otherwise drops out of college (Jeffreys, 2012).

Blended/hybrid learning: A style of instruction that provides closer integration of online and classroom-based teaching. Learning, reading, exams, and quizzes are done online, and the class hour is reserved for discussion and interaction with the instructor (Manwaring et al., 2017).

Dropped course: A course that a student has enrolled in before the start date of class but has been dropped before the official census date (Cipher et al., 2019).

e-learning: Methods of learning through the use of any electronic medium (Baker & Unni, 2018).

Gateway course: The first course within a discipline to provide transferable college credit (Lunsford & Diviney, 2020).

Online course: A course in which a minimum of 80% of the content is delivered online with no face-to-face meetings (Allen & Seaman, 2004). For the purpose of this study, distance education courses and online courses refer to the same types of courses.

Persistence: Students continuing in college by reenrolling in courses for subsequent semesters, ideally leading to degree completion and graduation (Bergman et al., 2014).

Retention: Continued enrollment in a program from admission through program completion (Garra & Hunker, 2014).

Self-efficacy: Bandura (1997) described self-efficacy as the belief that a person can achieve a particular outcome. It is a person's belief or lack of belief that they have the ability to determine their outcome and also bring about changes (Yancey, 2019).

Success completion rates: Course completion with passing grades of C or better in classes (as defined at the research site).

Withdrawal: A student's officially discontinuing a course prior to the end of the term (Cipher et al., 2019).

Significance of the Study

The study is significant because it addressed the concerns of the administration and faculty regarding attrition in online courses at the study site. Distance learning is an integral component of the institution, and with the increase in online offerings, the college stakeholders are concerned about online attrition, which is higher than in face-to-face courses. The results of this study can also provide insight and assist the college stakeholders to meet the goals of the strategic plan and create positive social change in student graduation rates. Revealing perspectives of online faculty and online students demonstrated their thinking as to what influences and contributes to online attrition at the study site. I will share my interpretations of these perspectives with those involved in the delivery of online programs or those who may be interested in developing new online programs.

Online learning is no longer an exception in higher education. According to national data, in the fall of 2018, 34% of all undergraduate students were enrolled in online courses at degree-granting postsecondary institutions, and there were indications that online learning would continue to grow in the future (Hussar et al., 2020). Despite the increased enrollment percentage in online courses, student retention rates remain lower than for students taking traditional, face-to-face courses. Most researchers examining online education courses have suggested that students do not perform as well in online courses compared to traditional, face-to-face courses (Bettinger et al., 2017; Jaggars & Xu, 2016).

At a 4-year university, Bettinger et al. (2017) used instrumental variables approach to conduct a study that observed approximately 230,000 students enrolled in over 168,000 sections of 750 different courses. All courses were offered both online and in-person and were identical in most ways. The authors found that students taking the online version of a course performed worse on average than students taking the face-to-face version of the course. In addition, Bettinger et al. found that students who enrolled in online courses were also more likely to receive lower grades in future courses and less likely to be enrolled in school the following year.

Similarly, course completion has been found to be lower for students enrolled in online courses (Murphy & Stewart, 2017). Although previous studies have focused on the benefits of online delivery, there has been a continued lack of understanding about the skills that learners need to succeed (Jacques, 2017; Poelmans et al., 2020).

Research Questions

Online learning has become mainstream in U.S. higher education by providing ease of access and affordability while becoming an acceptable form of education and learning (Neumann & Neumann, 2016). Even though higher education is facing a decline in overall enrollment, online education has increased (Vigness, 2019). Researchers must identify elements that could potentially lead to decreasing online attrition rates (Jaggars & Xu, 2016). The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore online faculty and online student perspectives regarding why students drop out of online courses at one state college and gather the recommendations of online faculty and online students for improving online retention. The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: What are online faculty perspectives regarding why some online students drop out of online courses at the study site?

RQ2: What are the perspectives of online students regarding why they drop out of online courses at the study site?

RQ3: What are online faculty and online student recommendations for improving retention in online courses?

Review of the Literature

I obtained the literature compiled for this review through comprehensive online library search methods of the Walden University Library. A systematic literature search of studies published between 2016 and 2020 was completed to identify articles on online learning attrition using the following databases: ERIC, Academic Search Premier, Education Research, ProQuest, EBSCOhost, Wiley Online, and Google Scholar—. The review of relevant research revealed works of key authors as well as the works cited by these authors. I reviewed the journals retrieved with equal attention; however, those with titles addressing online learning and online attrition proved to be most beneficial to this study. The scope of the literature review includes research on online attrition rates in higher education, barriers to online learning, and instructional design.

Conceptual Framework

Online education has changed over time in response to the needs of individuals; however, online course completion remains lower than face-to-face courses at the study site. To examine why students, drop out of online courses, I used Tinto's (1993) model of institutional departure as the conceptual framework. Although Tinto may not have

studied online students, students, whether in online or face-to-face courses, experience

the same or similar issues. Hence, Tinto's theory was relevant to this study exploring

online attrition.

After characterizing a theoretical model of college student attrition in 1975, Tinto

revised the model in 1993. In the model of institutional departure, Tinto (1993) identified

factors that lead to a student deciding to voluntarily leave a program of higher education:

family background, skills and abilities, prior schooling, intentions, goal and institutional

commitments, external commitments, academic performance, faculty and staff

interactions, extracurricular activities, peer-group interactions, academic integration,

social integration, and intentions. These factors also exist with online students.

These preentry attributes, such as prior schooling and external commitments,

collectively lead the individual to formulate educational goals and make a commitment to

those goals as well as a commitment to the institution (Masango et al., 2020). In the

institutional departure model, Tinto (1993) indicated that subsequent experiences within

the institution contribute to the decision to continue enrollment or to exit the school.

These institutional experiences may be formal or informal and academic or social.

According to Tinto (1987), positive experiences lead to greater academic and social

integration within the institution, whereas negative experiences will weaken the student's

goals and institutional commitments, thus increasing the likelihood of departure from the

institution. Tinto's model has been used to explain the college student attrition process.

According to Tinto (1975), retention can best be explained as an interaction between the

student and the institution.

According to Tinto's (1975) theory, the student brings to college such characteristics as family background and personal attributes and experiences, each of which is presumed to influence not only college performance but also initial levels of goal and institutional commitment. These characteristics and commitments, in turn, interact with various structural and normative features of the particular college or university and lead to varying levels of integration into the academic and social systems of the institution. According to Tinto (1975), "Other things being equal, the higher the degree of integration of the individual into the college systems, the greater will be his commitment to the specific institution and the goal of college completion" (p. 96). Tinto's model focuses on the role of the institutional and emphasizes the education process. Although Tinto's model focused on the characteristics and needs of the traditional student, the model is still relevant to online learning; therefore, I used Tinto's model as the conceptual framework of this study to explore both student and faculty perceptions about attrition rates in online courses at the study site.

Review of the Broader Problem

Challenges of Online Learning

Students choose online programs primarily for flexible schedules, work and family obligations, and the school's reputation (Jarvie-Eggart et al., 2019; U.S. News and World Report, 2015). Whereas online programs may be more convenient, many students underestimate the volume of the workload and level of commitment required in online courses (Bawa, 2016; Jiang et al., 2019). Although online programs have flexible schedules, researchers have noted that for many students, time management is a difficult

task because online courses require a great deal of time and intensive work (Halawa &

Kizilcec, 2015; Moessenlechner et al., 2015; Zimmerman & Kulikowich, 2016). Many

studies have noted patterns of students enrolled in online classes and how these student

characteristics affect course outcomes and retention rates (Bawa, 2016; Dewberry &

Jackson, 2018; Holden, 2018; Lee et al., 2018).

Student Characteristics Affecting Course Outcomes

Poor academic performance is directly associated to a lack of time management

skills that leads to procrastination (Zimmerman & Kulikowich, 2016). Moessenlechner et

al. (2015) explored motivational factors of working students and the main difficulties and

challenges students perceive when having to organize and balance online education and

full-time work. The researchers found that time management skills are an important

characteristic for successful completion of online studies. Moessenlechner et al., along

with Zimmerman and Kulikowich (2016), suggested that students have difficulties with

time management skills or describe them as the major challenge to studying online.

Furthermore, based on the findings from a large study of 100,000 online students, Halawa

and Kizilcec (2015) noted that one obstacle for online learners was finding time for the

course. Zimmerman and Kulikowich also obtained similar results in their study. These

findings indicate that online students face challenges concerning the lack of flexible time

management skills.

Self-direction and self-discipline are key characteristics to online success.

Students who lack initiative may experience demotivation and subsequently quit either

their course or degree program (Bawa, 2016). Concern for students that do not possess

these characteristics were addressed in the 2015 Survey of Online Learning, Grade Level:
Tracking Online Education in the United States. The survey found 68.3% of academic
leaders believed students needed more self-discipline to succeed in an online course than
in a face-to-face course and that student retention was a greater problem in online courses
than in face-to-face courses (Allen et al., 2016).

One of the major challenges in online classes is motivation (Karkar-Esperat,
2018). The purpose of the Karkar-Esperat study was to identify the learning experiences
and examine the challenges faced by three international graduate students enrolled in
online, asynchronous classes in an American public university. The results showed study
participants reported difficulty remaining motivated in some courses due to the lack of
interaction with classmates, the instructor's absence, and lack of prompt feedback from
both their peers and the instructor (Karkar-Esperat, 2018). Although studies have been
primarily focusing on traditional settings when investigating the role of motivation in
learning, a lack of motivation was a major factor in drop-out rates in e-learning courses
(Moessenlechner et al., 2015). Adult distance learners' decisions to drop out of online
programs have been due to meaningful factors, such as basic physical constraints from
work, scholastic aptitude, family and personal issues, motivation for studying, academic
integration, interaction, and motivation (Choi & Kim, 2018).

E-learning (or electronic learning) is a form of distance learning that requires the
use of various technologies, including the internet, to communicate, share ideas, access
information, and share knowledge from instructors to learners (Igbokwe et al., 2020).
When specifically examining motivation in e-learning courses, Moessenlechner et al.

(2015) also found that students in e-learning environments were motivated and that e-learning was at least as effective as learning in traditional settings, with content, methods, and support services (more than technology) playing a crucial role in motivation and satisfaction of students. Additionally, Halawa and Kizilcec (2015) developed a survey to disclose reasons for disengaging from a course. Their results were consistent with early models of attrition that emphasized the importance of goal-directed behavior, such as level of motivation. Self-discipline and self-drive are crucial characteristics of motivation in online students (Stupinsky et al., 2018).

Stark (2019) compared the motivation of online and face-to-face students through an examination of performance predictors and whether motivational variables are more connected to course performance for online compared to face-to-face courses. Stark surveyed 778 student participants and found that when comparing the motivation of students in online courses to those in face-to-face classes, there were significant differences. Additionally, the results showed that students in online classes reported significantly lower levels of motivation compared to students in face-to-face courses, which suggests students enrolled in online courses are less motivated by both the content of the course material and the prospect of obtaining better grades compared to those in face-to-face classes. Colleges remain concerned with higher attrition rates in distance learning than with students in traditional classes; however, students continue to state a preference for online courses, despite the contradictory sense that they have a greater likelihood of not passing an online course than a face-to-face course (Stark, 2019). Stark reported that students in face-to-face classes are more likely to seek peer and instructor

help than in online learning environments. Thus, investigating factors that increase

student success in online courses might include peer mentoring, faculty responsiveness,

and collaborative activities.

Impact of the Instructor and Student Relationship

The relationship between online student and instructor is essential for success in

online learning. Ferguson (2020) demonstrated the impact of the student and instructor

relationship through exploring student attrition for online precalculus and calculus

courses. Although all students had the identical instructor, textbook, course requirements,

course content, and online supplemental resources, the results from the study indicated

online precalculus had a 28.24% attrition rate, which was more than double the 13.56%

attrition rate from the face-to-face precalculus course. Even though the online students

had access to video lectures of the face-to-face class sessions and all students had access

to instructors during office hours, the results for the online students were less successful.

These results support the importance of student and instructor relationship.

The physical disconnection between online students and faculty causes feelings of

isolation and can lead to students withdrawing from class or college (Karkar-Esperat,

2018). Boton and Gregory (2015) used qualitative methods to explore instructors' views

and challenges with online teaching. They sought to find strategies to enhance online

education and measures to help reduce online attrition rates. Adopting online activities

results in higher engagement and retention in an online program (Martin & Bolliger,

2018). Research has suggested the limited opportunities for social interaction between

students and instructors may contribute to online student attrition (Boton & Gregory,

2015; Kebritchi et al., 2017; Martin & Bolliger, 2018). Students have identified a feeling

of being disconnected from others and perceived a lack of social interaction in online

courses (Jacobi, 2017). Stone et al. (2016) explored experiences of students enrolled in

online courses and noted challenges of student engagement, persistence, and success

when taking classes online. In another study, students communicated feelings of

isolation, a lack of connection with others, and a need to feel included and valued (Cho &

Cho, 2016). Consistent with the overall population of online undergraduate students, the

majority were adult learners, with the largest group aged between 25 and 50. The key

findings common to both Stone et al. (2016) and Cho & Cho (2016) studies was the lack

of connection with the class community whether it is between the instructor and student

or between the student and peers (Cho & Cho, 2016).

Online student achievement requires students to remain actively engaged in the

online course. In pursuit of identifying what causes student disengagement in online

courses, Halawa and Kizilcec (2015) collected self-reported data from over 100,000

online students. They observed how a lack of connection with instructor and peers

affected course completion. In terms of perceived social belonging, their results revealed

that social integration remains an important component. In contrast to Tinto's concept of

social and academic integration, which characterizes a general state in an institution,

social belonging is a subjective experience based on perceptions and interpretations of

environmental cues. Several educational institutions have sought to redesign the

interpersonal dynamics of the face-to-face classroom to create a sense of community in

online classes (McClannon et al., 2018). Despite understanding the value of creating the

feeling of community in online learning environments, effective strategies of cultivating a feeling of inclusion must be further explored and the first step needs to be an acknowledgment that the current level of technology has fallen short in capturing the richness and complexity of face-to-face communication in online learning (Arasaratnam-Smith & Northcote, 2017).

The affective connection is one of the most important factors in creating online classrooms that engage students, which in turn increases their mastery of content (Steele et al., 2018). Promoting positive emotional connections between instructors and students begins with a positive social presence in the online class. Whereas the quality of instructional design and technology is important, peer interactions, as well as an active and meaningful relationship with the instructor, build the community necessary to create feelings of belongingness, safety, and efficacy (Larmuseau et al., 2019). Recognizing the importance of the students' emotional being encourages a sense of inclusion, creating spaces where diversity and difference are not only accepted, but applauded. Online course designs that include opportunities for students to collaborate, such as discussion forums, group projects, and live chats, increase student-to-student bonds (Ibrahim, 2020). In order to create a positive social presence for students, instructors might consider using micro lectures in videos to illustrate difficult concepts, hold live time office hours, offer video conferences for evaluating performance, and ensure students receive prompt and meaningful feedback (Steele et al., 2018).

Instructional Design and Instructor Training

Even before the issues arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, online teaching and online course offerings were increasing (Chiodini, 2020). With the increased need for online classes from both student populations and institutional demands, the need for quality control over course design is crucial. Research on rubrics that evaluate course designs have demonstrated little ability to design courses with the standards that correlate with preestablished successful student outcomes (Jaggars & Xu, 2016; Liang et al., 2017). Jaggars and Xu (2016) based their research on a course design rubric using the following four categories: (a) organization and presentation, (b) learning objectives and assessments, (c) interpersonal interaction, and (d) use of technology. In 23 online courses, the results suggested that the affective connections were most important in online course designs (Jaggars & Xu, 2016). This finding supports the need for personal interactions with classmates and instructors being a basic foundation of online course designs because student success, persistence, and resilience is positively correlated to frequent and meaningful interactions with faculty as well as fellow students.

Online course design can enhance or derail an online student's learning. To explore the link between the two, Tootoonchi (2016) studied the connection between the classroom learning environment and student perceptions. Tootoonchi found that effective online learning and teaching requires curriculum design and delivery that connects and motivates students in different ways from those of face-to-face classes. Although a student may do well in a face-to-face class, online learning requires students to be self-learners, self-disciplined, independent thinkers, and better time managers (Tootoonchi,

2016). Tootoonchi concluded that self-learning without interactions with and support from the instructor and peers becomes extremely challenging.

Despite the different educational modes available to those seeking to further their education, a one-size-fits-all approach applied to online learning is often used, meaning the internal content is converted into a form deemed suitable for an external delivery (Gillett-Swan, 2017). Gillett-Swan (2017) found a significant problem with the assumption that traditional teaching methods can be directly converted to an online teaching format. When participants were compared to their face-to-face counterparts it was found that these students often faced several barriers usually not experienced by those engaging in an in-person class. It was found that although educators were considered to be digitally literate educators some of those same educators did not understand how to appropriately apply online instructional design and delivery (Orlando & Attard, 2016). Instructional design and delivery should vary depending on the curriculum content (Orlando & Attard, 2016).

Essential to online success is a well-designed course, which students can easily navigate. Although an instructor may be qualified to teach, they may lack online experience and have difficulties when implementing a user-friendly online classroom environment. Teaching online points to the importance of training for online instructors (Schmidt et al., 2016). Participants in the study conducted by Karkar-Esperat (2018) stated that some of the difficulties they encountered in online classes were associated with a lack of instructor's preparedness for teaching online classes. They felt some instructors lacked the experience in organizing the structure of online courses and

encountered hardships in maintaining or uploading content and setting due dates. This class structure created a lack of confidence in the instructor's online presence, causing participants to feel overwhelmed and unsupported and unable to fulfill the class requirements.

In addition, participants found navigating the course too complicated. The instructor's lack of preparation in teaching online classes negatively affected the engagement and success of the online student. The conclusion was that effectively organized courses help students stay motivated and persist in the course. Further, findings revealed that instructors teaching online courses need additional training, so that they become facile using their institution's learning management system and can employ effective techniques to enhance the online learning experience. Moreover, instructors need to provide clear, frequent communication with students, and demonstrate their active presence in the online course (Karkar-Esperat, 2018; Yang, 2017). The Karkar-Esperat (2018) study on teaching online substantiates these points about the importance of training for the online instructor.

Based on the research above, a summary of the literature review follows. The literature indicated student retention is a greater problem in online courses than face-to-face courses (Allen et al., 2016). In addition, online learning requires self-direction and self-discipline, and students who lack initiative may experience demotivation and subsequently quit either their course or degree program (Bawa, 2016). Online students face challenges with a lack of time management skills. Moessenlechner et al. (2015) and Zimmerman and Kulikowich (2016) found time management skills are an important

success factor for successful completion of online studies. The Moessenlechner et al. study and the Zimmerman and Kulikowich study findings both revealed that students view difficulties with time management skills as a major challenge to studying online. Online courses should be specifically designed for that format because what works with face-to-face courses may not work online. Thus, an engaging learning design must allow students to easily navigate each component in the online course (Kebritchi et al., 2017). Jaggars and Xu (2016) suggested that frequent and effective student-instructor interaction creates an online environment that encourages students to commit themselves to the course and perform at a stronger academic level.

Course design and a combination of internal and external factors can also lead to students dropping out of online courses. Gillett-Swan (2017) maintained that instructors cannot assume the format for a face-to-face course will be compatible with an online format. In addition, Gillett-Swan stated each modality requires different skills to engage students. Furthermore, faculty who teach and design courses should make appropriate adaptations when teaching online since it requires different learning techniques for engagement and retention for the instructor and the student. When the student is not equipped with the appropriate online learning, they may feel alienated, causing disengagement or withdrawal from the online course (Gillett-Swan, 2017). Students may be unaware of the skills and characteristics required for online learning and misguided by the initial attraction of flexibility and convenience. It may be a combination of factors that lead to students dropping out of online courses. This study explored faculty and student perspectives regarding why students drop out of online courses at the study site

and faculty and students' recommendations for improving online retention. Given the growth in popularity of distance education and the implications of the above extant research in online attrition, institutions, course designers, and instructors need to understand effective online course design and instructional delivery. Examining the perceptions of students and faculty as to why students drop out of online courses is warranted to address factors of online attrition and ensure an increased level of support for students and faculty are necessary to identify the causes of students dropping out of online courses.

Implications

I anticipated this study would provide benefits for students, instructors, staff, and administrators in relation to online attrition at the study site. The recommendations from the online faculty and online student participants in addition to the knowledge gained from the literature review will provide strategies on how to improve online retention. The study findings could possibly render faculty to develop strategies for online students such as an introductory course to online essential skills. Faculty could also possibly produce a best practice guideline slide presentation or written document for both online faculty and students. To support online students and online faculty, supportive programs to retain students, increase course completion, and improve graduation rates could include student advisors providing first time online students with a checklist of required skills or a survey to identify the student's skills. Based on the study findings, I explored two tentative options for potential development of a deliverable project. Two of the most common genres for this type of study are a recommendation paper or professional development

training. Although a recommendation paper would outline techniques and strategies

readers could possibly employ, it would not ensure the information from the study was

read and understood by all. However, to develop and deliver a professional development

training would ensure the study site stakeholders in attendance learn how to implement

strategies to improve online attrition. Having participants engage in activities where

information from the study is applied and explored is more effective than depending on

individuals to read the recommendation paper.

<div align="center">**Summary**</div>

In Section 1, I discussed the local problem of online student attrition. At the study

site, the attrition rate for students enrolled in online classes is higher than students

enrolled in face-to-face classes. This gap in practice with the attrition rate between online

and face-to-face students continues to be a concern of the study site. Institution

administrators recognize this problem and the need to embark upon solutions to this

issue. Hence, the purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore online faculty and

online student perspectives regarding why students drop out of online courses at one state

college and online faculty and online students' recommendations for improving online

retention. The research questions are aligned with the purpose of the study.

Additionally, in Section 1 I provided a review of literature compiled through a

comprehensive online library search method. Research indicates online learning has

many challenges and barriers that affect student persistence. In this study, I used Tinto's

institutional departure model (1993) as the conceptual framework to explore student

attrition in online courses. The implications from this study are to produce a program to reduce online student attrition.

In Section 2, I will include the methodology for the study. In addition, the qualitative study will provide a deeper understanding of the personal perspectives of the participants with regard to attrition in online courses rather than a quantitative study (Yin, 2016). In addition, in Section 2 I will describe the criteria for selecting potential study participants. Lastly, in this Section 2 I will outline the procedures for data collection and analysis.

Section 2: The Methodology

Research Design and Approach

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore online faculty and online student perspectives regarding why students drop out of online courses at one state college and the recommendations of online faculty and online students for improving online retention. Although I considered a quantitative approach to conduct this study, I opted for the qualitative method to gain a better understanding of the personal perspectives of the participants regarding attrition in online courses. The qualitative approach is most suitable when the goal of the researcher is to decipher, examine, and analyze information to gain insight into a phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Additionally, when researching the unknowns of the rapidly changing online learning, qualitative research is most relevant (see Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) further stated that researchers who conduct qualitative studies interact with smaller groups of participants, hence obtaining information on the experiences of those individuals in a particular setting. These types of studies are not meant to generalize to a larger population, merely to gain insight into the phenomenon from this specific group of participants. In this study, I explored the perspectives of a small group of both faculty and students from a state college to gain insight into the local problem.

Qualitative research has been conducted on a wide range of topics. Furthermore, qualitative research is devoted to representing the views and perspectives of a study's participants (Yin, 2016). The qualitative method is appropriate when researchers seek a detailed account of human phenomena like feelings, thought processes, and emotions,

which are difficult to obtain through the quantitative method (Yin, 2016). Qualitative

research, unlike quantitative research, enables the researcher to find detailed information

about a small group of people or cases (Creswell & Clark, 2018). The opportunity to

collect personal feedback from the participants is not present in the use of quantitative

survey instruments. As such, I deemed the qualitative method appropriate for gathering

the detailed perspectives of faculty and students regarding this issue.

Many qualitative designs are available, and each design has distinctive

characteristics. A narrative design provides stories about the lived experiences of one or

two participants (Wang, 2017). However, in this study I collected data from a larger

number of participants using interviews. I also considered grounded theory, which

enables researchers to seek out and identify elements in the social surroundings that focus

on specific issues with the purpose of creating a theory at a conceptual level (see

Creswell & Clark, 2018). In this study, although I explored why students drop out of

online courses, I did not directly investigate the social surroundings of the topic or create

a theory, so the grounded theory design was not suitable. Ethnography involves the study

of a cultural group with the goal of comparing similar behaviors of individuals or a group

rather than changing behaviors (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this qualitative study, I

examined the perceptions of participants, not participants' behaviors. Ethnography is both

a process and a product that focuses on human society and culture (Merriam & Tisdell,

2016). Since I did not focus on a cultural group, this design was also unsuitable for my

study. The goal of the current study was not to understand how the world appears to

others but to collect data about the participants' perspectives.

After considering several possible qualitative designs, I chose the basic qualitative design for this study because basic qualitative research collects data through interviews, observations, or document analysis (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). It is the most common type of research found in education. The goal of a basic qualitative study is to uncover and interpret the meaning of the subject being researched (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A basic qualitative study focuses on a combination of various methodologies or approaches that are not aligned with any particular methodology (Caelli et al., 2003). Although it is difficult to define, Caelli et al. (2003) concluded that the general focus of a qualitative study is to understand an experience or an event. Additionally, generic qualitative research divides broad categories into genres of interpretive description and descriptive qualitative research (Caelli et al., 2003). Furthermore, generic studies allow the researcher to develop research designs that fit their research needs (Kahlke, 2014). A generic qualitative study served the purpose of this study because I sought to gain a better understanding of why online students drop out of online courses.

Participants

The purpose of qualitative research is to explore a phenomenon or local problem by gathering data that will provide a detailed description and thorough understanding of the phenomenon (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). I used purposeful sampling in this qualitative study. Purposeful sampling focuses on small groups or individuals within a larger group, documenting the process used in qualitative research when a researcher selects participants who meet the criteria in order to gain knowledge of a phenomenon (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Purposeful sampling guides the researcher in the

identification of information that is rich and assists the researcher with an identification

of the criteria for selecting participants for a study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Merriam

and Tisdell (2016) suggested using this sampling procedure enables a researcher to

intentionally select a sample that will yield a significant amount of information about the

phenomenon. Thus, purposeful sampling is a type of nonprobability sampling where

researchers recruit participants that have experience with the phenomenon being

examined (Patton, 2015).

      Qualitative research sample sizes vary but are usually small due to the time it

takes for the researcher to gain access to the research site as well as the time it takes to

gather in-depth information from individual participants, code the information, and

analyze data for themes (Creswell & Clark, 2018). For these reasons, the purposeful

sample in this study was small to allow for in-depth dialogue. I interviewed a total of 11

participants: five online faculty and six online students. Creswell (1998) suggested

conducting five to 25 interviews to reach saturation in a study. Romney et al. (1986) also

found small samples adequate in revealing comprehensive and precise information when

the participants have a certain degree of expertise on the subject being studied. Only

participants from the study site who met the following criteria were invited to take part in

the study: (a) online faculty and students selected had no prior relationship with me, (b)

faculty participants included full- and part-time online instructors from various

disciplines and with at least 2 years of online teaching experience, and (c) student

participants were at least 18 years of age and had completed at least two terms of online

classes.

Before the start of the study, I submitted a request to study site administration requesting their permission to conduct this study. Following the recommendation of Creswell and Clark (2018), I sent specifics of the research study to the study site, requesting a letter of cooperation. Once this approval was acquired, an application was submitted to the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) seeking conditional approval of the study. When conditional approval was granted, an application to the study site IRB seeking final permission to conduct the study was submitted (IRB approval number 04-15-22-0198428). Once that approval was granted, I submitted that approval to the Walden University IRB for the final approval to conduct the study and then worked with the director of the Office of Institutional Research (OIR) at the study site to begin the data collection process. The OIR compiled a list of potential participants that met the study criteria. Then I gave the OIR the initial email to send to potential participants, with responses to be sent to me. The email provided an overview of the study, the voluntary nature of the participation, participants' right to opt out of the study at any time, the benefits and possible risks of participation, and informed consent. When emails were returned to me with a completed consent form, I contacted the potential participants by email to confirm their interest and set up interview appointments at a time convenient for them. The interviews were conducted over the Microsoft Teams platform from my home.

Taking measures to protect participants are of the utmost importance to researchers. Hence keeping the participants from any potential risks the study may cause. Participants were required to sign an informed consent form. I established a rapport with participants while maintaining an ethical, respectful, nonjudgmental relationship.

Although I worked at the study site as a faculty member at the time of the study, I

explained to participants that when it came to this study, I was a doctoral student at

Walden University and was not acting in my position at the college. I also reassured them

that participating in the study was voluntary and that they would not be penalized for not

participating or for any responses to the questions. Names of participants will remain

confidential and information they provided will be securely maintained in a locked file

cabinet and be kept for 5 years before being disposed of by shredding hardcopy

documents and deleting electronic documents.

Data Collection

Although I had originally planned to conduct face-to-face interviews, due to

COVID-19 restrictions, the interviews took place over Microsoft Teams to adhere to

safety precautions. Santhosh et al. (2021) reported that both researchers and participants

found videoconferencing platforms enhanced the qualitative data collection process, data

management, and information security. Furthermore, Archibald et al. (2019) documented

the convenience of using the Zoom platform for qualitative studies, its capacity to be

interactive with participants, and the ease of use. In addition, their results suggested that

Zoom served as a highly suitable platform for collecting qualitative interview data and

similar technologies, such as Microsoft Teams, will likely make an important and

positive impact on conducting qualitative research in the future. For this qualitative study,

I conducted semistructured Microsoft Teams interviews with a purposeful sampling of

five online faculty and six online student participants.

Face-to-face interviewing allows the researcher to interact with the participant and react to verbal and nonverbal language. I created two interview protocols: one for online faculty and one for online students (see Appendix B). Interviewing is a useful method to collect qualitative research data about phenomena that cannot be directly observed and represents a natural encounter where the interviewer communicates and builds rapport with participants while observing their body language (Irani, 2019). For both the researcher and participants, the interview can also reveal perceptions into backgrounds, experiences, attitudes, principles, ambitions, outlooks, and sentiments (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). One-on-one, informal interviews are beneficial in qualitative research studies when the participant is willing and comfortable in sharing information, adding to the wealth of material required to make meaningful findings of relevant themes (Creswell & Clark, 2018). Another benefit of using informal interviews is that the face-to-face collaboration between the participant and researcher typically means there is little to no delay in response (Davis et al., 2019). The interviewer can concentrate on asking the interview questions and expect a response.

I ensured the interview questions were aligned with the research questions and the conceptual framework to confirm adequate data collection. Research participants were reassured that they would be treated with respect and their rights and confidentiality would always be maintained. At the time of the interview, as suggested by Creswell and Clark (2018), with the participants' permission I recorded the interviews and entered notes in my reflective journal as participants verbalized their answers. The interviews lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and took place on Microsoft Teams. Once the

interviews were concluded, I quickly reviewed my reflective journal to ensure accuracy in documentation.

Keeping Track of Data

To document the collection of data, I maintained a research log. I recorded the participant's name, date, and time and location of each interview in the research log. Additionally, I kept a reflective journal with details of any thoughts and occurrences pertinent to the information being collected. According to Galletta (2013), a reflective journal allows for documentation of the researcher's thoughts, assumptions, decisions, and actions taken.

Role of the Researcher

As recommended by Creswell and Clark (2018), my role as the researcher was to document and examine the interview transcripts, maintain a research log, and add to the reflective journal during the interview process. I gathered data from the interviews and analyzed them to generate codes, categories, and themes. In a qualitative research study, it is essential to avoid biases because it affects the validity and reliability of the research findings (Yin, 2016). To preserve credibility and validity, it was crucial that my role at the study site as professor and department chair did not distort the data.

At the time the study was conducted, I was a professor and department chair at the study site. I have been a professor for 20 years and have served as department chair for 6 years. In these roles, I suspected the potential participants might be familiar with my name; however, since I did not teach online courses and online courses were not offered in the department I chaired, potential participants did not have a personal relationship

with me. During my tenure, I had encountered students who struggled in online and hybrid courses. Additionally, I have also experienced faculty members who struggled while teaching online courses. During the shutdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as department chair, I became involved in resolving many issues with students and instructors who were inexperienced with online learning because all classes had to be taught remotely.

In my role at the study site, I have seen how the lack of online learning and online teaching experience can become frustrating to both the student and instructor. These observations have led me to believe that online learning and teaching require different skills than face-to-face classes. The concern I have for students prompted the topic for this study. Although I have observed certain issues with online learning, I did not allow my past experiences to bias this study. Biases can distort the truth and skew data in qualitative research (Shaw & Satalkar, 2018). To avoid this occurrence, I maintained a reflective journal about my personal biases caused by a lack of communication with former online instructors and what I have observed with students who have struggled in online courses because of problems they had with course content. I did not allow any previous interactions to bias the outcomes of this study and journaled to ensure my biases did not influence this study in any way.

Students who I have taught in the past were excluded from participating in this study. Additionally, I informed participants of possible risks of participating in this study, including any possible minor anxiety related to experiences discussed during the interview. I also informed the participants that all identifying information would be kept

confidential and that each participant would be given a pseudonym for the study. All information collected will be kept in a password-protected file and destroyed after 5 years.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process in qualitative research studies is composed of data that are organized, transcribed, and analyzed (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). I manually conducted data analysis in this study. The interviews were manually transcribed within 24 hours following each interview. I read the transcripts several times to become familiar with the data to clarify any possible misunderstandings. Saldana (2016) stated preliminary jottings are helpful for remembering initial thoughts. This suggestion was followed as I collected and formatted data. I followed Braun and Clarke's (2013) thematic analysis steps that entail searching for and determining the most common and significant patterns from the data gathered. The six phases of the thematic analysis were used as follows: (a) becoming familiar with the data, (b) generating initial codes, (c) searching for themes, (d) reviewing themes, (e) defining and naming themes, and (f) producing the final report (see Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 87).

While reviewing information retrieved from interviews, I coded data and looked for any consistent and repetitive occurrences. Codes with similar topics were clustered together and grouped into categories forming a preliminary analysis. I paid close attention to patterns to avoid coding duplication. The top themes identified served as the basis of the study conclusions and recommendations.

Trustworthiness is tantamount to the appropriate evaluation of qualitative studies. Lemon and Hayes (2020) recommended the use of four intertwined and interdependent strategies to ensure trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. I followed this recommendation and used the four strategies to ensure trustworthiness in this study.

Credibility ensures the study measures what is intended, and it supports a rigorous research process (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). The results of the study were based on the personal perspectives of each participant. To increase the credibility and accuracy of the study findings, member checking was conducted. For clarity of the interview interpretation, each participant received an emailed copy of the preliminary findings for review. Seven of the 11 participants responded to the request and concurred with the preliminary findings. This approach confirms the accuracy of the data and findings by returning to the source (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Transferability indicates the length to which the results of qualitative research can be replicated in similar types of situations. The transferability of this research study will be achieved by including many details of the study research and setting. The results from this study will contribute to research concerning attrition in online courses. Dependability involves participants evaluating the findings and the interpretation and recommendations of the study to make sure that they are all supported by the study findings (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). To ensure the dependability of the study I adhered to the entire research process, including the purpose, research questions, research design, participant selection, data analysis, and reporting the findings (see Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). I maintained a

research log as an audit trail to ensure dependability. As noted by Bloomberg and Volpe (2019), the researcher should regularly reflect on the research activities and experiences during the research process. The reflective journal was used as part of the data analysis process to establish the dependability of the research findings. Notes in the reflective journal helped me to recall my thoughts and participant comments.

Confirmability ensures all views and opinions are equally considered and unbiased (Ellis, 2019). I safeguarded confirmability by maintaining a clear path explaining how data were collected and how interpretations were made. The confirmability of the study measures how objectively the research process has been executed (Johnson et al., 2020). For this study, I established confirmability through maintaining a reflective journal of initial thoughts collected and member checking the preliminary study findings to verify accuracy. I did have biases caused from personal issues I have experienced with online learning such as dealing with an instructor not giving timely feedback or having feels of being alone and ignored in my educational pursuit. Additionally, in my role at the study site, I have seen both students and instructors struggle with course design as well as a lack of student motivation. I did not focus on my personal biases. I consciously put personal biases aside by not responding to participant answers or adding my feelings to the line of questions when interviewing participants. This was my way of ensuring my personal words and thoughts were not included in the interruption of the participants response and data results. That way my feelings about online learning and why students drop out of online courses and remained objective by focusing on the raw data (see Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). During the

interviews I made sure to remain on topic and not use comments or nonverbal cues to prejudice the participants response. In addition, I used my journaling vigilantly to look out for any of my personal biases. Qualitative studies demand that the researcher acknowledges any bias. Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary findings with all participants to verify data collected were accurate or if any information was missing. This step also minimized potential biases.

According to Yin (2016), discrepant cases can occur when two or more findings conflict or are inconsistent. The cases that do not align with the themes generated will be reassessed and noted as discrepant cases within the results. Yin stated that this step strengthens the credibility of the study (2016). It ensures the researcher will maintain diligence in reporting the results of data analysis.

Data Analysis Results

The purpose of this study was to explore online faculty and online student perspectives regarding why students drop out of online courses at one state college and recommendations from online faculty and online students for improving online retention. The study focused on the research problem that is a gap in attrition rates between online and face-to-face students. I conducted 12 Microsoft Teams interviews with five online faculty members and seven online students. Once the interviews were completed, the interviews were transcribed by the researcher within 24 hours. Then I read the transcripts several times to become more familiar with the information collected. During this process, I searched the data collected for the most common and significant patterns. At this point, open codes were selected from the consistent and repetitive occurrences in the

data. Open codes are the notation of labels for any information deemed relevant to responding to the research question (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Axial coding is the grouping of open codes (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Small numbers of open codes were clustered into individual axial codes and organized to create the nine themes as shown in Tables 1, 2, and 3. The tables show the relationship of each theme to the relevant research question. Table 1 shows the relationship with RQ1 and the open and axial codes.

Table 1

Emerging Themes: RQ1

RQ1: What are online faculty perspectives regarding why some online students drop out of online courses at the study site?

Open Codes	Axial Codes	Themes
Code 1: Unrealistic requirements Code 2: Technology experience Code 3: Technology issues Code 4: Unrealistic goals Code 5: Lack of understanding content Code 6: Lack of communication Code 7: Test anxiety Code 8: Content difficulty	Code 1: Student must complete prerequisites first Code 2: Unaware of skills or knowledge required Code 3: Understand course requirements prior to signing up Code 4: Have basic computer knowledge	Theme 1: Skill level of the student
Code 9: Family issues Code 10: Time constraints Code 11: Balancing work/home/school, health, pandemic	Code 5: Communicate with instructor when problems arise Code 6: Difficult to focus on school during pandemic	Theme 2: External student issues
Code 12: Procrastination, lack of preparation Code 13: Lack of planning Code 14: Unable to manage time and responsibilities	Code 7: Hard time balancing work, school, and family Code 8: Students need to have good time management skills Code 9: Self-motivated	Theme 3: Time management skills

Table 2 shows the relationship with RQ2 and the open and axial codes.

Table 2

Emerging Themes: RQ2

RQ2: What are the perspectives of online students regarding why they drop out of online courses at the study site?

Open Codes	Axial Codes	Themes
Code 15: Lack of instructor flexibility Code 16: Lack of understanding requirements Code 17: Length of time to receive instructor feedback	Code 10: Communicate with instructor Code 11: Contact instructor when having a problem	Theme 4: Lack of communication with the instructor
Code 18: Procrastination Code 19: Lack of self-motivation Code 20: Problem with managing time	Code 12: Procrastination Code 13: Lack of self-motivation Code 14: Problem with managing time	Theme 5: Time management issues
Code 21: Overwhelming number of assignments, Code 22: Course overload, work, family Code 23: Difficulty locating assignments, course design	Code 15: Excessive assignments, Code 16: Due dates Code 17: Not engaging, Code 18: More work than face-to-face Code 19: Difficulty locating documents	Theme 6: Course content

Table 3 shows the relationship with RQ3 and the open and axial codes.

Table 3

Emerging Themes: RQ3

RQ3: What are online faculty and online student recommendations for improving retention in online courses?

Open Codes	Axial Codes	Themes
Code 24: Be understanding Code 25: Connection with student and instructor Code 26: Instructor must have a welcoming tone online Code 27: Use Teams and Zoom to meet students	Code 20: Open communication with student and instructor Code 21: Instructor should reach out to student early in the term	Theme 7: Communication between online faculty member and online student
Code 28: Explanatory videos Code 29: Week at a Glance on LMS Code 30: Provide list of resources Code 31: LMS documents are easily found	Code 22: Simplify LMS for easy navigation Code 23: Course design must be user friendly Code 24: Use videos to help with navigation	Theme 8: Ease of navigation
Code 32: Have online meet and greet Code 33: Engage students Code 34: Human presence Code 35: Don't fill in-box with unimportant information Code 36: Group projects that build community Code 37: Send a clear message Code 38: Offer virtual map of LMS Code 39: Give student material early if they want to work ahead Code 40: Give instructions in several ways Code 41: Reach out to struggling student Code 42: Quality Matters, course design Code 43: Consistent communication with instructor Code 44: More than one type of assessment Code 45: LMS setup, interact Code 46: Course design easy to follow Code 47: Take literacy courses prior to online Code 48: Complete online orientation	Code 25: Share resources with students Code 26: Explain assignments in more than one way Code 27: Include video explanations and directions Code 28: Create a sense of community	Theme 9: Qualities of a successful online faculty and online student

As illustrated by Tables 1, 2, and 3, nine main themes emerged from the resulting codes: Theme 1: skill level of the student, Theme 2: external student issues, Theme 3: time management skills, Theme 4: lack of communication with the instructor, Theme 5: time management issues, Theme 6: course content, Theme 7: communication between faculty member and student, Theme 8: ease of navigation, and Theme 9: qualities of a successful online student. The nine themes were developed to answer the research questions for the study. Presented are the findings on how the themes relate to the guiding research questions for the study.

Evidence of Quality

Once the interviews were completed, they were manually transcribed within a 24-hour period. To become familiar with the data, transcripts were read several times as recommended by Saldana (2016). I used open coding, axial coding, and then the themes emerged. Then codes with similar topics were clustered together and grouped into categories forming a preliminary analysis. The top themes identified served as the basis of the study conclusion and recommendations resulting from the study (see Appendix E). To ensure trustworthiness as recommended by Lemon and Hayes (2020) I used four intertwined and interdependent strategies to ensure trustworthiness. These include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

During inquiries to address the interview questions and answer the research questions by conducting semistructured interviews, the participants were allowed to freely describe their experiences and thoughts about dropping out of online courses. I established credibility with a relaxed and engaged conversation of 45-minutes to an hour.

These in-depth interviews were recorded to ensure the accuracy of the information

collected. Then the interview sessions were transcribed, which helped to validate brief

notes taken during the interview and ensured confirmability.

Sufficient data were collected, and the findings have been detailed in this study

along with the methodology. The data came directly from the participants, and I reviewed

the transcripts thoroughly to avoid personal biases. In this study, confirmability was

ensured by video recording of the semistructured interviews. Dependability in this study

was confirmed with the account of the research methods which gives the prospect of

repeating the study by another researcher. Additionally, my personal biases were

documented in the reflective journal. Also, I member checked the preliminary study

findings with the participants to verify accuracy.

Findings

The study findings are reported based on the purpose of this qualitative study,

which was to explore online faculty and online student perspectives regarding why

students drop out of online courses at one state college and what recommendations online

faculty and online students have for improving retention in online courses. Each theme

was used to help respond to the research questions. Tinto's (1987) theory on student

departure guided this study because students who experience academic difficulty are

more likely to drop out. During the interview process each participant described their

perceptions and experiences in teaching and taking online courses. Through the data

collections process I learned why students drop out of online courses. The findings are

presented according to the research questions, the themes that emerged from the research questions, and evidence to support the themes.

RQ1: What Are Online Faculty Perspectives Regarding Why Some Online Students Drop Out of Online Courses at the Study Site?

Theme 1: Skill Level of the Student

Frequently, it was noted that students who attempt online courses without academic technology skills have difficulty from the very beginning of the course. Theme 1 emerged as a concern for all faculty participants. According to the faculty participants, the importance of the student online technical skill level has a direct correlation with the student outcomes. Faculty Participant 1 stated:

I noticed that students become frustrated if they are not able to find vital course documents. An online student must be an independent learner. Students must be familiar and comfortable with what it takes to learn online in order to be an independent learner. Without familiarity students become intimidated. In addition, if a student has not figured out where the syllabus and other documents are located by Week 2 or 3, they are in serious trouble which can lead to them dropping out of the course.

Furthermore, Faculty Participant 2 stated, "Students unfamiliar with the Learning Management System (LMS) usually have difficulty navigating and trouble submitting assignments because of this." Similarly, Faculty Participant 4 talked about the hardships students have when they are not familiar with basic computer skills needed for an online course. Faculty Participant 4 summarized that often students who do not have the

necessary skills for online learning struggle in their online courses and those same

students may feel intimidated and become frustrated with their online classes under these

circumstances of lacking essential knowledge for online courses. Student participants

vocalized frustration and confusion as a common feeling when enrolled in online courses.

They expressed the LMS navigation was difficult and the course content appeared

unclear. Additionally, a pattern emerged from the faculty participants regarding the

importance of being a student with the ability to balance outside commitments and

conduct multiple tasks simultaneously as a required skill of an online student.

Multitasking is also essential in dealing with external issues according to faculty

participants.

Theme 2: External Student Issues

Faculty and student participants mentioned that external issues, such as family

commitments, work obligations, and finances can frequently influence academic

performance and persistence. These issues were a common theme among the faculty and

student participants. Faculty Participant 2 believed these issues were especially

experienced during the COVID pandemic and stated, "many students were dealing with

health issues, family issues, and loss of employment." In addition, Faculty Participant 3

said "during the pandemic I had to constantly think outside of the box to help students to

complete the course while they dealt with children being homeschooled, employment

uncertainty, and a frightening pandemic." In parallel, Student Participant 4 said:

> During the pandemic it was a difficult finding time to get my work done. I usually
>
> drop my kids off at school and get quiet time to complete my assignments before

going to work. During the pandemic it seemed like I was never able to find enough time to get things done and found myself falling behind and feeling overwhelmed.

Faculty Participant 3 discussed how family and work issues affected student success. In addition, Faculty Participant 3 stated, "at times school may not be the priority for the student especially when dealing with raising a family. Also, outside responsibilities such as work can cause students to miss or submit assignments late." Furthermore, Student Participant 2 believed students take online courses for the convenience of completing schoolwork during their free time and expect instructors to be flexible when dealing with students who are trying to balance work and family issues. Although students and faculty had similar perceptions on the effects of outside issues on the online student success, there were major variations on the expectation of online learning. As expressed by Faculty Participant 5, "I think there is a stigma when it comes to online courses that they are easier than face-to-face courses when in reality online courses are more intense." Students took online courses for the expected ease of maintaining school, family, and work at the same time. Whereas faculty participants used the same online course content as in their face-to-face courses, including assignments, rigor, and expectations for the online student.

Theme 3: Time Management Skills

According to faculty participants, time management is an essential skill to the success of online students. Even though time management is a vital skill, the general opinion of faculty participants is that many students lack effective time management

skills. Faculty Participant 1 said, "online students need to be their own motivators," but this is not always the case with students. According to eight of the 11 study participants, lack of motivation, procrastination, and lack of self-discipline were the main reasons students left their online courses. Faculty Participant 4 voiced that "students think online classes will be easier and if they do not have self-motivation, they quickly find themselves in trouble." According to Faculty Participant 5, "online classes are more time intensive, and the workload can be more strenuous on students than a face-to-face course."

Faculty Participant 4 stated, "many students find it difficult to balance challenging content in online courses with a full semester class load of demanding courses along with family and work responsibilities." Faculty Participant 4 also went onto say that "procrastination is a big problem with some students. Many students let assignments build up and feel overwhelmed once they realize how much they neglected." Also, Student Participant 2 stated, "that to be accountable, some students require constant reminders and motivation from the instructor and their peers." Faculty Participant 1 stated, "if the student is not proactive in working on assignments and reaching out to the instructor, they are liable to become overwhelmed and frequently drop out of the course." Faculty participants agreed that time management is a requirement for online students. However, most of the student participants agreed they lacked time management skills. Furthermore, online students viewed that lack of time management to be the cause of stress and the initiating factor of dropping out of online courses.

RQ2: What Are the Perspectives of Online Students Regarding Why They Drop Out of Online Courses at the Study Site?

Theme 4: Lack of Communication with the Instructor

As indicated by faculty participants, remote learners are more prone to attrition because of the lack of interaction with other students and faculty members. Furthermore, Faculty Participant 5 believed that class interaction is by far less effective online than it is face-to-face. Four of the six student participants noted the lack of clear communication with the instructor to be a cause for them dropping out of a course. Students believe that high levels of instructor activity occur prior to the course start date since much of the information for the class is posted long in advance and many times copied from previous terms. According to Student Participant 3, it seems that as a student "your job is to teach yourself and submit assignments without much interaction from the faculty member." Student Participant 3 experienced feeling isolated in the online classroom. Student Participant 1 revealed, "I felt frustrated with the lack of communication." Student Participant 1 described being confused with an assignment and not knowing exactly what was needed in order to be helped. Then after emailing the professor, they received a vague response back that did not help. Student Participant 1 also went onto say, "I've been at fault for waiting until the last minute to reach out to the instructor, but that was because I felt unsupported by my teacher and classmates."

Student Participants 3 and 4 commented on the length in time it took to receive a response from the instructor regarding a question or assistance on course content. Student Participant 4 stated "I have waited several days before getting a response to an email."

Having a connection with the online instructor and other online students was viewed by all participants as an important element of online student success.

Additionally, Student 5 said, "the lack of daily interaction with others, especially my instructor, was the hardest part of adjusting to taking online classes." In this study, the major difference between the participants was that the online instructor realized the importance and difficulty of making connections with online students. Online faculty frequently looked for strategies on how to better engage and connect students with course content and peers. In contrast, online students mainly complained about the lack of communication.

Theme 5: Time Management Issues

Finding balance with academic and personal commitments is paramount to student success. Student participants brought up the importance of time management as well as the problems students have when they do not have effective time management skills. Student Participant 4 stated that taking classes online has been a jungle as far as dealing with work, family, and school. Student Participant 2 misjudged the time required to successfully complete online assignments and took for granted the responsibility of balancing personal life and school. Students often suffer from anxiety and stress when they are unable to successfully complete assignments. Student Participant 2 referred to this overwhelming feeling as "course overload." Student Participant 2 stated that "when you are behind in assignments and feel overwhelmed with life it's difficult to know where to start to get back on track." Having command of time management is an essential skill.

Additionally, having familiarity with necessary skills for online student success is also important. Faculty Participant 3 has noticed that when communicating with students they have an expectation that online classes would be the same as face-to-face classes. Students expect to have similar assignments, as well as a certain level of faculty and peer interaction. However, Student Participants 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 believed that online classes have many more assignments than face-to-face classes for the same course. Also, Student Participant 3 mentioned that when registering for online classes "some students don't take time into consideration for studying and completing assignments with their lifestyle." Faculty participants stated in several instances that time management is a key factor of success in an online class and without this skill students have difficulty balancing family, work, and school. Hence the importance of having prior knowledge of what it takes to be successful in online courses.

Theme 6: Course Content

The content of difficult courses can be a challenge for many online students. The course content can be a determining factor of whether a student does well in a class, according to Student Participant 5, who said: "I withdrew from a class that was too difficult for me, but after taking a few other online classes I retook and did much better." Also, Student Participant 7 stated "there are certain subjects that are better to attend in-person and have the instructor in front of you to help you to correct errors and put you back on track." Student Participant 1 used the following as an example for differences they observed, if taking a math course, the instructor can see all the steps to a problem and have the ability to see where the student went wrong. Furthermore, Student

Participant 7 stated, "On an exam, you can receive partial credit in a face-to-face math class, but in an online math class, an exam only requires the input of the answer to the problem, which does not include the work." The lack of clarity can seem as if the online student is at a disadvantage compared to the face-to-face student according to Faculty Participant 4. Additionally, Faculty Participant 2 stated that "sometimes the course requirements are too difficult for the students to achieve within the time required." Student Participant 7 revealed, "I've spoken to online peers who have dropped a course once they review the syllabus, and the teacher requirements are pretty difficult for them, and they feel they would be better in a face-to-face class." From the information retrieved from the study participants, online students must be realistic when accessing their capabilities in taking online courses. Course content needs to be evaluated prior to enrolling in a course.

RQ3: What Are Online Faculty and Online Student Recommendations for Improving Retention in Online Courses?

Theme 7: Communication Between Faculty Member and Student

All the faculty participants interviewed discussed the importance of having an ongoing and open dialog with students. They found this to be an important factor in retaining students. Faculty Participant 2 noted an issue such as being confused about an assignment can be clarified with a simple call or email. Faculty Participant 1 said that "students need to feel you are a click away." In addition, Faculty Participant 3 believed that when students do not feel a sense of community, they are liable to drop out of class. To build community it is important to promote engagement of the learner through

communication, class assignments, and activities. For example, Faculty Participant 1 emails and calls students that are inactive online for over a week. Student Participant 2 stated, "that policies and procedures are not always clearly stated." Four of the seven student participants stated the importance of clear and concise communication from the instructor as a key component of online success. Also, Student Participant 6 stated that the instructor response time for emails regarding questions about assignments and exams are critical to success. Faculty Participant 2 believes that feedback is critical and should be given as soon as possible.

Both student and faculty participants believed that Microsoft Teams and Zoom were excellent tools for communicating with students. Although faculty participants only recently began using these tools due to the Covid pandemic, they have stated they would continue using them because they saw the value of communicating with students face-to-face on Microsoft Teams and Zoom. Faculty Participant 3 specified that "with Microsoft Teams and Zoom I was able to personally connect with students and when there was any confusion, I could explain step by step." Furthermore, Faculty Participant 4 stated: "Microsoft Teams and Zoom are a great tool for interaction with students and assisting them with assignments." Student Participant 3 confirmed this sentiment "I really appreciated being able to talk to instructors on Teams." Student participants agreed it was much easier to understand assignment requirements when instructors used Teams or Zoom to explain what was needed. Faculty Participant 2 believes the connection between online students and faculty can increase the chances of a student remaining in class and ultimately successfully completing their goals.

Just as the faculty and student participants noted, positive online experiences such as an instructor personally emailing or calling to see if they can help get a student on track can lead to greater academic performance and student retention. For example, Faculty Participant 2 said "if a student does not submit the first assignment by Week 2 of the term, I contact them to see if I can help."

Faculty participants agreed that the online faculty connection with their online students is pertinent to retention. Both faculty and student participants mentioned the positive effect of open communication. Faculty Participant 3 stated "identifying the students with potential challenges early in the term is critical to the student success." This participant suggested that early intervention helps to retain students. In addition, Faculty Participant 3 observed that early intervention gives faculty members the opportunity to identify student resources for assisting students. Faculty Participant 4 noted that student resources "need to be easily accessible along with guidelines for technology and multimedia use." Faculty participants experienced that sharing these resources can alleviate some of the potential concerns such as obtaining assistance at the writing center or counseling services. Also, the faculty participants noticed that when students feel more relaxed, they are more committed, accountable, and connected to the instructor and peers.

Theme 8: Ease of Navigation

The online faculty and student participants agreed that the design and layout of the LMS is one of the most important elements in the successful completion of an online course. Faculty participants have noticed that the LMS affects the way the online course is accessed and perceived by the student. Faculty Participant 1 stated, "course navigation

must be intuitive." Likewise, Student Participant 5 mentioned, "every class LMS is different. Some are easier to navigate then others. I have spent hours looking for assignments and then in other classes I can immediately find what I am looking for. A few faculty participants had completed Quality Matters (QM) training and set up courses using QM standards. QM is a widely recognized nonprofit organization that provides research-based best practices in online course design (Quality Matters, 2017). Faculty Participant 4 shared one of the recommendations of lessons learned from QM is to provide a folder for the student that boldly reads begin here. Faculty Participant 4 stated the contents of the folder would include the syllabus, weekly schedule, course rubrics, help information for technology, how to email your instructor, tutorials, etc.

The online course design should be simple and intuitive stated Faculty Participant 1. Student Participant 2 suggested: "Instructors should have a virtual orientation or video similar to what they do on the first day of a face-to-face class." Student Participant 3 recommended a "virtual tour of where documents and assignments are located." Furthermore, Faculty Participant 3 suggested that because "everyone learns differently it is important to set up the course and assignments to reflect the various learning styles of students."

Theme 9: Qualities of a Successful Online Student and Online Faculty

All participants agreed that the online student comes into a class with certain personal characteristics associated with student persistence. Faculty participants observed that the characteristics that are directly connected to course persistence include their academic experiences, their level of motivation, their demographics, their personality,

and their support network. In addition, Faculty Participant 2 believed that to be successful online a student must be proactive and an independent learner. Faculty Participant 4 recommended that "students review the course LMS prior to the beginning of class." Faculty Participant 4 believed that by being proactive and reviewing the LMS students become aware of course competencies, objectives, and where pertinent documents are located.

According to Faculty Participant 2, online faculty also need to be proactive in reaching out to students in need of assistance. Faculty Participant 1 noted that "the first few weeks are especially critical if a student is inactive." Some of the faculty participants email or text the inactive student and many place zeros for assignments to gain the attention of the learner. Students and faculty participants agreed that online courses must reflect real life and that educators must be flexible to life issues. Faculty Participant 1 stated "a student that is called into work when they need to work on, or submit, an assignment may only need an additional 24 hours to complete the assignment." An overall comment by all faculty participants was it is important to be flexible. This concept was also echoed by the student participants. Student Participant 2 said "teachers need to realize this is real life and students have a lot going on."

Faculty Participant 3 stated the "course design should be easy to navigate and should address all learning styles." Student participants suggested the need for ease of navigation in the LMS. Student Participant 2 recommended "instructors should give the class a virtual road map of the class that is similar to a shopping mall or a virtual overview as a YouTube video." In addition, Student Participant 2 also thought "it would

be helpful to have class information given in several ways." Student Participant 2 gave an example for how information could be described in various ways, "it could be a video and written in a few different ways."

Instructors realize they have the ability to make a positive change on student attrition by making simple adjustments in the course design, interaction, and communication with their online students. Understanding why students drop out of online courses allows instructors the ability to provide appropriate assistance. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore online faculty and online student perspectives regarding why students drop out of online courses at one state college and what recommendations online faculty and online students have for improving retention in online courses.

In comparing and contrasting the online participants' results, faculty noticed students became frustrated when they were unable to locate pertinent course documents. Student participants echoed the concept of feeling lost and overwhelmed when they were unable to complete assignments with ease. Faculty and student participants agreed external issues caused students to have hardships and drop out of online courses. Online faculty agreed students should not expect online classes to be easier than face-to-face classes because they require more effort and self-motivation. In contrast, student participants expected online courses to have a structure and content similar to face-to-face classes. In addition, most student participants felt online courses had much more assignments, busy work, and higher instructor expectations for the student to be self-motivated. Furthermore, faculty participants agreed that students are often unprepared for

the rigor of online courses because the students think an online course will be easier than face-to-face. Student participants found online classes to be more difficult in most cases. Additionally, online faculty participants expected students to be self-motivated; however, most of the student participants mentioned time management and self-motivation caused a serious struggle with balancing family, work, and school. Lastly, both faculty and students agreed with the importance of communication between the faculty member and student. They viewed timely feedback and interaction to be essential to success in online courses.

Summary of Findings

In this qualitative study, I enlisted a purposeful sampling of online faculty and online students to explore perspectives regarding why students drop out of online courses. All participants met the study criteria. Study participants were interviewed via Microsoft Teams, and then the data were transcribed and analyzed to generate open codes, axial codes, and themes. The nine themes that emerged to address the research questions were skill level of the student, external student issues, time management skills, lack of communication with the instructor, time management issues, course content, communication between faculty member and student, ease of navigation, and qualities of a successful online student.

I reviewed data carefully for any discrepant cases. Inasmuch as no discrepant cases were found, this procedure was essential to ensure the data were not distorted with my personal biases. To avoid any distortion, I documented my personal thoughts that were caused by issues I have experienced with online learning such as dealing with an

instructor not giving timely feedback or having feelings of being alone and ignored in my online educational pursuit. Also, my biases include personal observations of both online students and online instructors who have struggled with course design navigation as well as online students who lacked motivation. These were documented in the reflective journal and I member checked the preliminary study findings with the participants to verify accuracy. Study findings were aligned with the research problem, the research questions, and the literature on the topic of online attrition. Additionally, the findings were associated with Tinto's (1993) model of institutional departure, which serves as the conceptual framework.

The study findings regarding the importance of connecting, engaging, and supporting online students is consistent with Tinto's model (1975, 1987) of institutional departure. In Tinto's work, social integration is a pertinent element of student persistence. Tinto's model identifies how the interaction with academic and social systems of the educational institution directly affect student persistence and dropout rate just as noted in the results of my study. Tinto (1987) theorized in the student integration model that persistence in higher education is based on the students' initial commitments to their program and institution; however, these commitments are continually modified by the students' interactions with the academic and social systems of the institution. The social systems of the institution include the interaction with peer groups, faculty, and staff. The lack of these relationships can diminish a student's commitment to complete a course. Hence, the more socially integrated students feel in their college, the less likely they will be to leave.

As theorized by Tinto (1987), student retention in online courses can increase by faculty interacting with the students who feel overwhelmed and in need of assistance. If students feel a sense of community, they are more committed to completing their courses. This feeling of community can be obtained with simple class activities and interactions between faculty and student. Social integration is a pertinent component of student persistence (Tinto, 1987). According to Tinto, social integration was a stronger predictor for retention than academic integration. Consistent with Tinto's findings, faculty participants found, remote learners are more prone to attrition since online interaction is not as effective as face-to-face in helping students to socialize and make connections with their peers. According to Tinto (1975), retention can best be explained as an interaction between the student and the institution.

Although all study participants as well as several research studies agreed that online education is more convenient for students, my study confirmed the findings of Bawa (2016) and Jiang et al. (2019) regarding the underestimation that most students have about the volume of work and commitment required to successfully complete online courses. The faculty participants' consensus was that online students need to be self-disciplined, self-motivated, and self-directed. This belief is also aligned with the literature. Allen et al. (2016) suggested the need for students to be more self-disciplined. Also, they observed that a key factor of online success is the interaction with the student and the faculty member. The study participants mentioned that the lack of communication can cause the student to receive lower or failing grades when the faculty member is unavailable to explain course assignments. Karkar-Esperat (2018) also

disclosed similar findings in study participants. In that study, students had difficulty due to the lack of interaction with classmates, the instructor's absence, and lack of prompt feedback from both their peers and the instructor. Ferguson (2020) went on to state the relationship between online students and the instructor is critical for success in online learning. A connection with the instructor and students is an essential factor in retaining and engaging students. This benefit was also mentioned by the participants in my study.

Tootoonchi (2016) found that effective online learning and teaching requires curriculum design and delivery that is engaging. Gillett-Swan (2017) endorsed the importance of an engaging course and delivery keeping in mind that online learning should not use "a one-size-fits-all approach." The findings in my study also confirmed it is not effective for an instructor to expect the same results with student engagement and content retention when course materials are directly transferred from face-to-face to an online platform. Faculty Participant 3 stated the ease of navigation on the LMS is important for access to content, clarity, and reduction of frustration for the student. Student Participant 2 also recommended faculty use familiar technology such as YouTube videos to engage students and explain complex assignments in multiple ways, which would be similar to what face-to-face instructors do to teach to the various learning styles. Digital natives were raised with technology and expect it to be engaging and interactive. Unfortunately, many online courses do not meet those criteria.

Students frequently drop out of a class because they become frustrated and unmotivated when the learning environment does not cater to their needs. The lack of fulfilling the needs of the student is why many undergraduates drop out of an online

course and aligns with Tinto's (1993) model of institutional departure, which serves as the conceptual framework. Tinto observed that a lack of focus on the needs of the student from the institution or faculty member will frequently result in student attrition. As seen in my study, patterns in behaviors from the students' experiences and social integration patterns play a part in students dropping out of online courses (see Tinto, 1993). Tinto asserted when students sensed either an academic or social connection to their instructor and the institution, they were more likely to be retained in their class. According to Tinto (1993) and the faculty and student participants in this study, the student and faculty connections with instructors can create meaningful relationships but failing to create such relationships can impede their academic progress, causing them to feel isolated and disengaged.

Based on my study findings, for the deliverable project I created a professional development training to help my target audience, online faculty members, combat online attrition. I chose to prepare a professional development training as a more inclusive vehicle of communication than a recommendation paper. Helping faculty participants engage in activities and brainstorming with colleagues on discussions about how the information from my research and my study can be used to increase the rate of online student retention will be beneficial to the college to retain online students and help them graduate. Strategies received through interviews with faculty participants and student participants and information found in the literature such as using QM, collegewide course design, student online training, and ways to increase faculty and student communication can be explored with peer and group activities and by brainstorming. Rather than

depending on individuals to read a recommendation paper, conducting an interactive

professional development including discussions with training participants actively

learning would be a more effective way of disbursing information from the study.

Section 3: The Project

Introduction

Based on the study results regarding the local problem of online attrition, I plan to implement a 3-day professional development training to share strategies for increasing online student retention with online faculty members. This professional development will focus on disseminating information from the literature and the current study regarding online student retention. The purpose of the training will be to gain the active involvement of the participants in using best practices to improve online student retention. The PowerPoint presentation (Appendix A) includes information about online student retention and directions for group and peer activities, which will give online faculty in attendance an opportunity to apply what they are learning to their online classes.

The planned interactive activities will engage training participants in exercises formulated to improve their online student retention knowledge and skills. The application of the training materials learned is the key purpose of brainstorming exercises for the attendees to compile information about their personal online instruction experience with online student retention and their potential solutions to improve online retention. After the online faculty in attendance brainstorm in small groups, they will share information with the larger group with the goal of collectively devising strategies to reduce the local problem of online student attrition while developing a roadmap and visual on how they intend to proceed with their online classes.

Rationale

Professional development is the most effective way to reach the target audience of online faculty members because it will directly engage the training participants while increasing their knowledge and understanding regarding the topic of improving online student retention. Palmer and Noltemeyer (2019) have acknowledged that factors, such as improving participants' knowledge and fostering group coherence, contribute to the effectiveness of professional development. To help participants absorb the information presented, I designed the interactive training activities to address the local problem of online student attrition. The effectiveness of professional development training is significantly related to the inclusion of active learning activities during the training (Castillo et al., 2016). The training materials will highlight the issues of online attrition and strategies to reduce online student dropout rates.

My intention with this professional development is to involve the faculty in their own learning. The training uses my study results to involve educators in interactive sessions, such as working on various case studies. The professional training will conclude with each online faculty member creating a personal deliverable that will be a strategy the participant plans to implement in their online course, such as being more flexible in regard to students with family or work issues. Participants will learn to design their course differently, adding video explanations or any best practices discussed during the training. The professional development can be most meaningful when it is designed based on the content the participants potentially find applicable to their current situation

(Walters et al., 2017). The purpose of this professional development is to empower the educators to make a significant impact on online retention at the study site.

Review of the Literature

I collected literature for this review through a comprehensive search of the Walden University Library. First, I conducted a literature search of studies published between 2017 and 2021 in the following databases: ERIC, Academic Search Premier, Education Research, ProQuest, EBSCOhost, Wiley Online, and Google Scholar. The following keyword search terms were used: *online student attrition*, *best practices, attrition prevention, online student engagement, online student success,* and *humanizing online learning experiences*. Next, I reviewed the journal articles retrieved from the search. The articles comprised studies on attrition prevention that revealed several categories beneficial to the current study. In addition, the articles identified researchers and other studies relevant to my work.

Professional Development

The relevant articles along with the data results from my study served as the foundation for my professional development training sessions. Arifani et al. (2019) claimed that professional development is one of the influential factors necessary to enhance teachers' creativity in course development and design. Additionally, faculty professional development allows teachers to adequately reflect on and respond to issues and concerns found in the learning environment (Kyaruzi et al., 2021). However, regardless of the professional development topic, the training experiences need to address how professionals can relate the information they have learned to their personal

circumstances (Zeleke et al., 2021). Zeleke et al. (2021) also stated that professional development must explicitly address the implementation steps for developing any new practices.

Faculty require specific knowledge of course content in order to make their ideas clear to students through the use of effective instructional strategies (Takker & Subramaniam, 2019). However, even though faculty are knowledgeable about the pedagogical content, it is important they understand how to better communicate with online students when students encounter difficulty while taking an online course (Kyaruzi et al., 2021). Keeping online students at the center of institutional decisions and investing in professional development to prepare faculty who teach online is considered humanized online education (Pacansky-Brock et al., 2020). Because adult learners tend to be self-directed, online faculty will hopefully be able to identify their weaknesses in dealing with online students and become partners in developing corrective plans of action (Zeleke et al., 2021). It is also beneficial for participants to retain training materials after the professional development, so they can continue to practice and revisit the information when teaching actual online courses (Borup & Evmenova, 2019). Borup and Evmenova suggested training include exemplars, encourage exploration, model best practices of online teaching, promote collaboration between online faculty members, and encourage reflection and self-assessment.

It is also important when designing professional development courses to not only consider what will be learned but how it will be learned (Borup & Evmenova, 2019). That is why I have designed my training to model effective online instruction with the

hope of increasing the skills of online faculty. The ultimate goal of my professional development is to use the information from my study results and literature review along with ideas from online faculty in attendance to identify promising practices that will effectively prepare online faculty to possibly redesign their online course or implement strategies to reduce online attrition.

Online Student Retention

Online student retention and success are critical to support the annual growth of students taking online courses. Online enrollment in the United States grew almost 8% between 2012 and 2017 (Snyder et al., 2019). As of 2019, approximately one third of all college students were enrolled in at least one online class (Snyder et al., 2019), and this number continues to grow each year. The literature regarding online student retention offers many suggestions for keeping students enrolled in online courses. For example, Stoebe (2020) noted an increase of 7% in the retention rate from the fall to spring the year an in-depth, virtual, student online orientation was implemented. An orientation that will familiarize students to campus support services will prepare online students for what is expected of them and how to be more successful online. This also reinforced the recommendation of Student Participant 3 in the current study who stated that an online orientation to demonstrate course requirements would be helpful. The professional development I created focused on the findings from the current study and the literature review. The topics of the following subsections align with the results from the current study and highlight possible strategies that can be used to improve online student retention.

Course Design

The ease of course navigation for students was mentioned several times by the participants in the current study as well as in the literature. Joosten and Cusatis (2019) conducted a study with both undergraduate and graduate students to examine instructional characteristics of quality in online courses and the relationship of those characteristics to student outcomes in online courses. According to their study results, key factors for online student success include how the course is designed and organized. Their findings confirm the significant impact that course design and organization and student experiences have on students' success in online courses. Joosten and Cusatis emphasized the importance of online course design and recommended tailoring course content for online learning rather than transferring face-to-face materials to an online course. The current study findings also suggest that efforts should be made to have courses organized by the instructors with the help of an instructional designer. Unfortunately, most online faculty have not taken coursework that helps them gain the skills required to teach online (McAllister & Graham, 2016). Having a partnership with an instructional designer should ensure the learning objectives are aligned with the course activities and assignments. Course design is an influential instructional characteristic and directly affects student outcomes.

Student and Instructor Relationship

The results from the current study reinforce the importance of a connection between the student and faculty member. The relationship between online student and online faculty is the single most important factor in determining the success or failure of

the student (Martin, 2019). Online instructors are challenged to connect and engage with students just as are face-to-face instructors. The struggle for most online instructors is to make online content presentation both personal and interactive at the same time (Baum & McPherson, 2019). Creating student and instructor rapport can be as simple as allowing online students the ability to share their interests by asking noninvasive personal questions (Ahmad et al., 2017). Asking a question can help to establish common ground between the student and instructor, and because students want to know that a caring and supporting person is working with them to gain success in the course, allowing for questions to be asked can be the difference between success and failure for some students (Martin, 2019).

Not seeing a face or hearing a voice may pose the greatest obstacle to establishing the relationships that are so crucial in the success and satisfaction of students today. Fortunately, technology has provided many tools to help instructors to bridge the social gap that exists and connect with students on a personal and genuine level. Creating a positive online climate and culture is vital to nurturing an optimum learning experience in which healthy faculty–student and peer relationships are built (Cicco, 2017). There are several practical and repeatable strategies an online instructor can embed in their online classroom, such as videos, Zoom, and Microsoft Teams opportunities. Connecting with online students is an essential part of building a bond. Trust that the faculty is supportive of student success increases with timely faculty feedback on assignments, emails, and course discussion boards (Jaggers & Xu, 2016; Martin et al., 2018). It is possible to establish rapport very quickly through using these tactics and doing so will increase the

satisfaction level of the student, reduce potential miscommunication, and generate

maximum engagement (Martin, 2019).

Support for Students

It is important that online students receive faculty content support for completing

course assignments, such as class materials that use visual formatting and clear language

to communicate concise instructions for what the students should know and do, in

addition to technical assistance for completing tasks. Not having both content and

technical support apparently influenced students' perceptions of satisfaction for online

courses because they felt a lack of assistance (Brown et al., 2020). There is a need to help

equip students with the essential tools and technologies applied in their courses and

programs from Day 1 (Kumar et al., 2019). To increase satisfaction in online courses,

students should be given an orientation to the course and an introduction to college

policies and resources. Moreover, as I found in the current study, students should be

provided with clear directions and information to manage their expectations about the

course and their interactions within it (e.g., how students will be graded, the instructor's

expectation for the students, etc.).

Students must also have easy access to technology, resources for tutoring, and

accessibility options. Additionally, the amount of active instructor participation in the

learning is also important Cole et al., 2021). The instructor's role is not only to design the

structure of the course but to interactively connect with the online students through online

conversations to enhance their learning experience. The instructors should maintain

communication with online students and keep students engaged and encouraged. This

includes providing reminders and detailed feedback on assignments in a timely and

effective manner. A key factor in student success is to provide suitable academic support

for the students (Millea et al., 2018). Effective resources typically include tutoring,

advising, counseling, academic interventions, and library resources. Faculty facilitation

of the online course along with course design is a key element in successful online

instruction (Martin et al., 2018).

Course Assessments

Course assessments that are used in face-to-face courses should be redesigned for

online delivery. Some of the common online course assessments include quizzes, essays,

projects, research papers, discussions, surveys, etc. (Martin & Ndoye, 2016). It is critical

for online courses to include assessments that are aligned to the course objectives

(Jaggars & Xu, 2016). In addition, there should be opportunities to make up assessments

or additional time given to students that have work-related issues, health issues, and

personal issues (Moore & Greenland, 2017).

Learner Engagement

Student engagement appears to be positively impacted by an involved instructor

(Berry, 2017; Martin & Bolliger, 2018). Improving student engagement is the key to

developing a deeper sense of belonging and a more trusting relationship between students

and their instructor. This is one of the most consistent findings within engagement

research. Researchers have attempted to conceptualize what instructor practices lead to

increased engagement and what roles online instructors must play in an online classroom

through the development of theories of online instruction (Bloomberg & Grantham,

2018). The role of the instructors is to design and organize the course; guide, model, and encourage conversations; and nurture the intellectual growth of the online student by providing social-emotional support to students. In addition, instructors should motivate students to complete assignments and make progress toward learning outcomes while monitoring student completion of assignments and progress towards course learning outcomes.

Online student engagement and student interaction with the instructor can be a catalyst for success. The instructor and student interaction in the online classroom is essential for the success of the student (Bolliger & Martin, 2018.). Bloomberg and Grantham (2018) demonstrated that instructor presence can be conceptualized in terms of three best practices. First, that instructors must be active in an online course in helping students to learn the how to navigate in the LMS and feel comfortable and confident in that space. Second, that instructors must provide high-quality feedback that addresses the issue and provides clear instruction. Finally, the instructors must engage with students through multiple modes of communication: email, course discussions, face to face, synchronous methods, etc. It is the combination of modes of communication that lead to a sense that the instructor cares about the student's success and provides increased learner engagement.

At the beginning of the online class, online educators must set a positive tone for the students. Berry (2017) found that instructors must emphasize a warm and welcoming tone in communications in order for those communications to be successful. Finally, Orcutt and Dringus (2017) found that an instructor's active interest in teaching and

passion for their subject can influence a learner's curiosity for a subject. Orcutt and Dringus similarly discovered that time spent in the early weeks of a course on helping students navigate the course and building connections to each other led to increased community and engagement. In both cases, additional instructor time within a course led to pay-off in student engagement.

Learner Support

Learner support for success in the online environment may include a resolution to help with basic computer skills, a simple personal problem, a technology issue, or it may be a need for assistance on something more complex like lack of internet service or lack of computer technology at home. Instructor support for the learner can enable them to succeed not only in a single online course but also in an online program. DeBoer et al. (2017) found that students who engaged in hands-on course activities in a massive open online course had significantly higher exam scores. Both the personal community and the course community provide support for the learner to achieve optimal engagement (Borup et al., 2020). The course community and personal community support can impact all three types of learner engagement: cognitive, behavioral, and affective. Cognitive engagement refers to a learner's engagement with the content of a class. Both the course community and the personal community can support cognitive engagement in the form of instruction or tutoring.

Martin and Bolliger (2018) suggested that learner engagement is a necessary prerequisite for learner satisfaction, perceived learning, and achievement in online coursework. Furthermore, research has examined the different types of learner support

that are essential for learner success, including technical support, academic support, and student support (Conceição & Lehman, 2016). The findings from the Conceição and Lehman (2016) study revealed online students desired supports such as encouragement from family, friends, and the instructor; technology assistance with the course; and self-care type supports including personal reflection and assessment of self, self-awareness regarding what needs to be accomplished, and action to carry out goals. Peer support in terms of online learning communities is also essential to the success of the online learner (Sundt et al., 2017). Learner support is critical to the success of online learners.

Humanizing Online Learning Experience

The online learning environment can feel isolating and dehumanizing, which leaves students feeling disconnected and negatively affects student learning and online course retention rates (Fox, 2017). To help mitigate the possible negative aspects that can inhibit the potential of online learning, educators can use strategies to humanize the online learning experience. It is suggested that maximizing human interactions in the online classroom creates feelings of closeness and connectedness (Parker et al., 2021). For example, Martin and Bolliger (2018) found that learners valued learner-instructor interactions above learner-learner interactions and learner-content interactions with proactive communication between the student and instructor leading to increased learner engagement. Humanized online teaching and learning facilitates engaged, motivated, connected students and helps them hone their student identity and sense of belonging.

It is essential in an online course to maintain quality in course design, course facilitation, course assessments, learner interaction, and learner support (Online Learning Consortium Quality Scorecard, 2019; Quality Matters, 2019).

Whether online or face to face, literature indicates that when faculty teach using rapport, students meet desired learning outcomes more frequently (Glazier & Skurat Harris, 2020). The Glazier and Skurat Harris (2020) study findings clearly demonstrated a correlation between increased online student retention and the teaching approach using rapport. The rapport teaching approach prioritizes the importance of instructors making human connections with students in online classes. The pedagogical approach of rapport is defined as instructor immediacy, instructor caring, and effective communication (Pacansky-Brock, 2020). Glazier and Skurat Harris concluded that research regarding online retention should focus on faculty behavior rather than student qualities since online faculty have little control over the qualities or life experiences and situations of their online students. Faculty can, however, control their presence in their online classes. Increasing rapport in online classes can improve retention and successful completion of the course.

Project Description

It is my intention to produce and implement a professional development training that will change how the target audience members engage with their online students. It will show faculty members how they can make an impact on online student learning. This training will offer practical ideas, which can address the local problem of online attrition.

Needed Resources

To develop and deliver an effective professional development training there are several resources that must be in place. First, I will need a schedule a time and secure a location to hold the training session. Second, I will need a list of all faculty who teach online. Additionally, to provide snacks, lunch and beverages for the attendees, I will need financial support from the chairs and deans. Other resources needed will be technology support such as a laptop computer, Wi-Fi connection, speakers, display screen, and clicker. Working together with all parties above will ensure effective implementation.

Existing Supports

Support from various departments will be required to implement the professional development. Beginning with the Academic Affairs office, they will assist with scheduling a smart room location (one that has technology, i.e., projector, screen, and computer) to hold the training. The collegewide chairs and campus deans will also need to be enlisted to notify faculty who teach online to attend the training. An essential department for providing assistance in the classroom is Information Technology. Information Technology will provide technology support including setting up a laptop, computer screen, and wireless clicker.

Potential Barriers and Potential Solutions

The potential barrier to the professional development is that faculty members have limited time and often do not want to attend trainings. Therefore, it is important to plan the training on the faculty development days where there are no scheduled classes and faculty are required to be on campus. From my experience, faculty can be the worst

students during training situations. Many faculty members will talk in class with a neighbor and use their cell phones, etc. The solution for this problem would be to engage the attendees with interactive activities during the training.

Implementation and Timetable

The best time to conduct this professional development is during the fall. Faculty have to report 3 days prior to the start of the term. This is an excellent time since faculty are required to attend professional development sessions during these days. Also, it will give faculty an opportunity to implement the retention strategies in their upcoming courses. Table 4 shows the timeline for the planning and implementation of the scheduled professional development training.

Table 4

Professional Development Planning and Implementation Timeline

Task number	Task description	Duration in days	Start date	End date
1	Contact Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning to set training date	1	05-June-22	05-June-22
2	Reserve training room	1	06-June-22	06-June-22
3	Develop invitation list	1	06-June-22	06-June-22
4	Send out save the date email	2	06-June-22	07-June-22
5	Determine training budget	5	08-June-22	12-June-22
6	Plan topics for training	5	07-June-22	11-June-22
7	Send out official email invitation and agenda	2	12-June-22	13-June-22
8	Order food	1	14-June-22	14-June-22
9	Develop program materials	6	15-June-22	20-June-22
10	Finalize agenda	2	21-June-22	23-June-22
11	Develop exit feedback form	3	24-June-22	27-June-22
12	Send program materials for copying	3	28-June-22	1-July-22
13	Order supplies	1	2-July-22	2-July-22
14	Confirm availability of technology	1	3-July-22	3-July-22
15	Confirm catering	1	5-July-22	5-July-22
16	Create name tags, sign-in sheets	2	8-July-22	10-Jult-22

17	Gather supplies and presentation items	2	12-July-22	14-July-22
18	Transport materials to training site	1	9-Aug-22	9-Aug-22
19	Set up room for training	1	10-Aug-22	10-Aug-22
20	Set up sign-in table	2	10-Aug-22	13-Aug-22
21	Arrive early at training site	1	10-Aug-22	10-Aug-22
22	Sound check technology	1	10-Aug-22	10-Aug-22
23	Conduct training	3	10-Aug-22	12-Aug-22
24	Analyze exit survey results	2	13-Aug-22	15-Aug-22
25	Distribute thank you notes	2	17-Aug-22	19-Aug-22

Roles and Responsibilities

My role will be to develop and present the professional training to online faculty. In addition, I will also be responsible to gain the support of administrators. The administrators will invite the online faculty to attend the training. In my role I will prepare the presentation, acquire materials needed for participants such as training handouts, and order snacks (Appendix A).

Project Evaluation Plan

Formative Evaluation

To ensure the training session will be effective and engaging, I will enlist two to three colleagues who teach online to evaluate the entire presentation and facilitator notes. The formative evaluation tool is included in Appendix A. Evaluators will provide feedback prior to the implementation of the professional development sessions. Then I will make appropriate revisions where necessary.

Justification

Formative evaluation is an effective process that is the best type of evaluation for me to use because I will be able to improve the training materials before presenting them

to the faculty. According to Mathison (2005), formative evaluation can be conducted in advance of delivering a professional training to gain feedback, which will identify if any course corrections are needed. It will be reassuring to have a critique from a representative group of the target audience of online faculty. Formative evaluation is an effective process for self-improvement and growth.

Overall Evaluation Goals

The overall goal for conducting a formative evaluation is to revise and improve the project prior to presenting the training. The input from my colleagues will ensure this project is revised to be the best it can be. With their feedback I will take any corrective actions needed to the project. Once the training is completed, I will do a follow-up formative evaluation. The follow-up evaluation will be conducted with the training participants. Their feedback given after the training will allow me to make any additional revisions to the project. My plan is to continue to train those that teach online to make a positive impact on online student retention. The formative evaluation will help me to make the project one that makes the greatest impact.

Stakeholders

The stakeholders for the professional training include online faculty, administrators, and me. Online student attrition affects the entire institution. To address the problems of online retention benefits the entire college. Faculty can be ensured a job, state funding for the institution, and most importantly the gratification of students meeting their goal of graduation.

Project Implications

Positive Social Change Implications

The positive social change that is implied by this training is that faculty will care about retention and do something about it. Taking action to decrease online student attrition will mean that more students will achieve their goal of graduating. By graduating, students will become gainfully employed in the community. Additionally, the increase in the college completion rates will financially benefit the college with state and federal funds based on graduation.

The project also has the potential to benefit relationships with faculty, students, stakeholders, and the community at-large. The study site strives to meet the needs of its local community and graduating more students can help accomplish this goal. Higher graduation rates and more individuals gaining employment in the community will demonstrate the commitment the college has for the success and well-being for the students it serves. This will also improve the image of the college and increase enrollment with others hoping to accomplish the same goal.

Importance of the Project

The importance of this project study and the related research is revealed in the implications for the increase of online student retention, which leads to more students graduating and obtaining gainful employment in their desired careers fields. The students will be able to find higher paying jobs with a completed degree than without those credentials. The completion of a degree provides both a pathway for economic security and motivation for other family members to pursue academic achievements. Online

students will raise families that will have a better quality of life. The successful degree completion also prepares students with improved economic status to support their local communities. A successful graduate may also be empowered to contribute to positive social changes, thus giving back to their communities or serving as positive role models with enhanced self-confidence. The stakeholders, who include administrators, staff, and faculty, will also reap the benefits of this project study with an increase in retention and completion rates. A higher graduation rate will not only attract potential students, but additionally it will increase federal funding and increase potential programs and resources for incoming students. With the information obtained from this project, there is the potential to improve relationships with colleagues and the community at large as they work to improve retention rates and ultimately graduation rates. These positive relationships can encourage potential students to pursue their academic goals; students can be confident that faculty, staff, and administrators have their best interest in mind.

Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

Project Strengths and Limitations

Both the current study findings and the findings from the literature review suggest that using proactive tactics to recognize and address students at-risk of dropping out of online courses can increase the retention rate at the local site. Muljana and Luo (2019) recommended college staff and administrators use proactive strategies to analyze incoming students' level of competence and preparedness for online courses. In addition, schools should collect personal information about the student's family and work responsibilities to determine which students may need interventions (Muljana & Luo, 2019). As the project developed based on the results of this study, I will offer professional development training to online faculty at the study site. In this training, I will discuss online strategies for retaining at-risk online students from dropping out of an online course. Reviews of research about courses with high dropout rates can be used to create policies, procedures, resources, and strategies for at-risk students, such as outreach programs targeted to those students with higher risks and professional development for faculty teaching online courses so they can better support these students. This professional development will reveal the importance of implementing retention strategies in online courses and highlight the influence training attendees can have on online student attrition.

The strength of this project is the potential of increasing online student retention. Educating online faculty about small, yet effective strategies that can be used in online courses will help to engage and retain online students. The current study findings

confirmed the importance of active communication, engagement, course design, and instructional guidance. These strategies all hold an equal, essential role in the increase in retention rates, which is a strength of this project. Ongoing support for students motivates them to learn and increases the chances that they will be retained (Moore & Greenland, 2017). To increase retention rates, Muljana and Luo (2019) suggested that institutions use early intervention approaches, such as providing academic support and feedback to online students.

A major limitation of my project is the 3 long days necessary to present the professional development training. Since the professional training will be scheduled for 3 days, many participants may not show up on for all the scheduled days. A commitment of 3 days means that online faculty will need to devote several days to my training instead of planning for the upcoming term. If faculty feel overwhelmed by the time commitment, they may not attend.

Recommendations for Alternative Approaches

I chose to conduct a qualitative study; however, conducting a quantitative study rather than a qualitative one would be another approach to study online attrition. Information gained from a quantitative study aimed at identifying reasons for online attrition could be used to classify predictors of attrition and provide possible interventions. Another approach could be to use a focus group to study the issue. The focus group participants could be observed during a school year. This approach might reveal when and where students and faculty are challenged with a task. Lastly, focus

groups of various student age groups could be an interesting way to determine whether the age of students has an effect on the study outcome.

The genre selected for my deliverable is a 3-day professional development. Although engaging participants in an interactive training will be effective, a possible alternative would be to write a recommendation paper. Even though I intend to provide a handout to the training attendees, a recommendation paper could be read several times at one's leisure and would not necessitate the time commitment of the 3-day professional development training.

Scholarship, Project Development, and Leadership and Change

Scholarship

The completion of my study and development of this project has allowed me to grow as a scholar and learn about the processes of scholarship. As a student in the doctoral program at Walden University, I have learned to be a scholar-practitioner. Being a scholar-practitioner has taught me how to be a life-long learner, to think critically, and how to evaluate research publications. In addition, I learned to figure out how to apply the information from my research in project development and my daily work. During this process I have personally grown in many areas, such as my written communication and scholarly voice. My experience with making revisions and improvements to my writing has taught me the value of scholarly word choice and opened my mind to the importance of writing with clarity for the reader.

In this process I have also gained curiosity, knowledge, confidence, and patience to conduct and analyze research. A scholar is one who seeks to understand potential

issues and problems. A scholar will also identify key research challenges in quest of a potential resolution or means of positively addressing the problem. Scholarship is effectively pursuing knowledge and utilizing the knowledge gained from the research.

Project Development

Completing this research study has taught me the value of project development. The data generated in this study has been a valuable tool and initiating purpose for a project. The collected data will also aid with obtaining stakeholder support for current and future projects. Once the stakeholders realize how the use of simple, yet effective techniques can increase online retention rates, they will provide any necessary support. Finally, this project has encouraged me to pursue the implementation of additional studies to overcome the many solvable issues that may exist in my career field. This has been a major skill learned in the pursuit of my doctorate at Walden University.

Leadership and Change

Knowing that I can now make a difference in assisting students to succeed and graduate is truly inspiring. Realizing that I can also research further topics and publish my findings that can benefit positive social change is exciting. I am honored to accept the challenge of conducting the necessary steps in researching a problem to provide change in my community.

Reflection on Self as a Scholar

As a scholar, I have learned the art of researching a topic, conducting a study, analyzing data, and writing like a scholar. My project began with a local problem that I have been concerned about. Then, research about what other scholars have previously

studied assisted me in determining the research questions. Generating the research questions gave me the direction needed to conduct interviews and gather data. What I found most rewarding was seeing that the results of the current study were similar to what had been found by other researchers.

Although this has been a rewarding process, it has not been without struggle. Becoming a scholar has come with a great deal of reading and feedback, which has changed the way I think when I write and what I think about the various topics that I am curious about. Knowing there is a process that I can use to explore what other scholars have studied and apply what I have learned to ignite change is not only appealing, but mentally exciting. Scholars are people who seek out information and find solutions to problems and issues. Lastly, knowing that sharing the study findings will offer solutions for positive social change related to online attrition is extremely rewarding.

Reflection on Self as a Practitioner

As a practitioner, it has been gratifying to be able to apply strategies and information learned from the findings of this study and the literature review to my current job. In a short time, I have had several opportunities to share information I have learned with both faculty members and students. I am excited for the future to see how I will be able to assist others and potentially increase online retention rates.

Reflection on Self as a Project Developer

As a project developer, I have had the pleasure of generating and designing a project that will bring about positive social change. Designing a project requires planning and foresight about the potential needs of others who are affected by the implementation of strategies and possible programs that address the problem. In the process, the project developer must be openminded when designing and implementing the project and realize the work being done is for the greater good. This requires the developer to evaluate and analyze the project prior to presenting it to an audience

Reflection on Importance of the Work

As I reflect on the difference that my study can make, I see a future of improved student learning and increased student retention in online courses. Already, I have offered students feedback on their struggles in online courses and provided guidance on how to navigate online coursework. I have also been able to share the findings of the current study and literature review with online faculty members who have come to me with issues regarding online students. Additionally, I have a renewed feeling of satisfaction and fulfillment in teaching and collaborating with stakeholders with the goal of contributing to the growth of online student success and the important body of literature about online retention.

Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research

Positive Social Change

Positive social change resulting from this study will be seen with an increase in retention and graduation rates. Through these increased rates, students will be able to

make an impact on their families and community by becoming vital contributors. With

better employment, students have the potential of living a healthier lifestyle. Faculty

members will become more involved in the process of retaining their online students by

using strategies based on data findings and literature findings. This, in turn, will create

more college graduates and increase online retention.

Applications

There are many potential applications for the information obtained in this project

study. Offering training for online faculty and online students is the foundation of

increasing student online retention. Training online faculty about strategies that will assist

online students to successfully complete online courses could be implemented annually

or biannually. These professional training sessions, along with the suggestions and input

from online faculty in attendance, will result in the construction of a bank of best

practices for online student retention. The best practices can be maintained online for all

online faculty to access. Faculty should also have online courses designed by someone

who has been educated in online course design. In addition, the creation of a robust

online training for online students could provide students with tools on how to navigate

online courses and provide them with answers to frequently asked questions. The

opportunities for implementing strategies, training, and other online retention initiatives

are vast.

Directions for Future Research

There is still a need for more studies to examine online attrition. Future studies

could focus on a larger sample and could employ an empirical design. Furthermore, this

type of study could report data from investigations or observations as well. I recommend that future studies examine the efficacy of faculty support, such as professional development opportunities including training and workshops. Additionally, further research could be conducted to explore how faculty support for the instructional design of online courses make a difference in online attrition.

Although student characteristics are among the determinants of student retention in online learning, seeking additional information on how retention strategies, such as online course orientations to technology and LMS, affect student outcomes could be considered. Forthcoming studies may consider exploring this topic in depth by using qualitative designs to look at how various student characteristics, such as age, race, economic background, and family structure, affect student outcomes. This study of student demographics could possibly discover potential characteristics of at-risk students and then provide the institution with an opportunity to intervene with assistance prior to the student dropping out of an online course.

Conclusion

The problem I addressed in this study was online college student attrition, and the purpose was to explore online faculty and online student perspectives regarding why students drop out of online courses at one state college and what recommendations faculty and students have for improving retention in online courses. I used a qualitative approach to collect and analyze data, resulting in the creation of a project that seeks to promote positive social change at the local site and possibly in the wider field of education. With the amount of online learning steadily increasing, it is essential that

educators become more knowledgeable and engaged in retaining online students. There are several strategies, such as placing importance on engaging online students, how a course is designed, and the communication between the instructor and student, that can be a catalyst for increased online student retention. Online student engagement is one of the factors attributed to student retention in online education (Mucundanyi, 2021). Increasing the retention of online students can also be accomplished through designing online courses that are easy for the student to navigate and creating an online environment where students can freely interact with the instructor and the instructor has an obvious presence in the online course.

I am grateful to be a part of the process of decreasing online attrition by encouraging both online faculty and online students to explore new online retention strategies with the findings of the current study and the literature review. Based on the findings of the current study and the literature review, I do believe the future of online retention is promising. Although there will be challenges in combating related issues, every step towards improving online student retention is meaningful to educators; community; and, most of all students.

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Appendix A: The Project

Please find the professional development training agenda, PowerPoint slides, formative

evaluation questions for colleagues, and formative evaluation questions for training

participants.

Attrition in Higher Education Online Courses
Professional Development Training
Agenda

Day 1

9:00 am	Introduction
	Slides 1 – 3
10:00 am	Slide 4: What are your thoughts on online attrition?
	Slides 5 – 7
11:00 am	Slide 8: Causes of attrition?
	Break
12:00 pm	Debrief
1:00 pm	Lunch
2:00 pm	Slides 9 – 20
	Break
3:00 pm	Pair exercise
4:00 pm	Conclude

Attrition in Higher Education Online Courses
Professional Development Training
Agenda

Day 2

9:00 am   Coffee – Social hour

10:00 am   Read literature (popcorn reading): *Retention in Online Courses:*
                            Exploring Issues and Solutions—A Literature Review

                            Break

11:00 am   Discussion

12:00 pm   Lunch

1:00 pm   Best practices (individuals, pairs, then large group)

2:00 pm
                            Break
3:00 pm

4:00 pm   Conclude

Attrition in Higher Education Online Courses
Professional Development Training
Agenda

Day 3

9:00 am   Best Practices (teach one, learn some)

10:00 am

                           Break

11:00 am   Try something new?

12:00 pm   Lunch

1:00 pm   Discuss your deliverable (pair share and present to class)

2:00 pm

                           Break

3:00 pm   What is needed to make this work?

4:00 pm   Conclude

Attrition in Higher Education Online Courses

Professional Development Training
Maria A. Parnell

The Local Problem

- The attrition rate in online courses is 26% compared to 19% in face-to-face classes (Internal Report, 2019)

- Many of the online courses fulfill the general education requirement for graduation (personal communication, April 9, 2019)

- A need for strategies to address attrition in online classes

2

Purpose

- My study explored online faculty and online student perspectives of why students drop out of online courses and their recommendations for improving retention in online courses

- Purpose to this 3-day training is to discuss literature findings and study findings regarding online attrition.

3

What are your thoughts?

- What have you experienced in your classes with online attrition?

- Why do you think online students drop out of their classes?

- Take a moment to write the answers to the questions then share your response with the individuals at your table.

4

Rationale

- This problem was selected after observing statistics of online students taking online courses.

5

Significance of the Study

- Despite increased enrollment in online courses, student retention rates remain lower than for students taking face-to-face courses (Chatman et al., 2019)

- These online students experience delayed degree or certificate completion, higher program costs, and increased student debt (Chatman et al., 2019)

6

Review of the Broader Problem: Time Management

- Students choose online programs for flexible schedules, work and family obligations, and the school's reputation (U.S. News and World Report. (2015, January 30).

- Time management is important because online courses require a great deal of time and intensive work (Moessenlechner et al., 2015; Zimmerman & Kulikowich, 2016).

7

Review of the Broader Problem: Time Management

- Poor time management can affect academic performance, which can lead to dropout (Zimmerman & Kulikowich, 2016).

- Students often must balance online education with responsibilities outside the classroom, such as full-time work (Moessenlechner et al., 2015).

8

Causes of Attrition

Activity:

- Step 1: Make a list of 5 reasons students may drop out of an online class.

- Step 2: At your tables, compare your lists and decide on the top 5 reasons.

- Step 3: Select a spokesperson to read the list to class.

9

Review of the Broader Problem: Motivation

- 68.3% of academic leaders felt students needed more self-discipline to succeed in an online course (Babson Survey Research Group (2018).

- Karkar-Esperat (2018) found a major challenge in online classes was motivation associated with lack of interaction with classmates, instructor absence, and lack of prompt feedback from peers and instructor

- Stark (2019) found students in online classes reported significantly lower levels of motivation compared to students in face-to-face courses

10

Review of the Broader Problem: Instructor-Student, Student-Student Interaction

- Online precalculus students had a 28.24% attrition rate, more than double the 13.56% rate in the face-to-face course with the same instructor, textbook, and course requirements (Ferguson, 2020)

- Limited social interaction between students and instructors contributes to online student attrition (Martin & Bolliger 2018)

11

Review of the Broader Problem: Instructor-Student, Student-Student Interaction

- Students can feel disconnected and perceive a lack of social interaction in online courses, which poses challenges for student engagement, persistence, and success (Stone et al., 2016)

- Online students may feel isolated, a lack of connection with others, and a need to feel included and valued (Cho & Cho, 2016)

- Effective online learning and teaching require curriculum design and delivery that connect and motivate students' in different ways than face-to-face classes (Tootoonchi, 2016)

- Online instructional design and delivery also not a "one size fits all approach" (Orlando & Attard, 2015, p. 119)

12

Review of the Broader Problem: Instructional Design and Training

- Challenges for online instructors include lack of preparedness for teaching online (Karkar-Esperat, 2018)

- Technical difficulties can negatively affect the engagement and success of students (Karkar-Esperat, 2018)

- Training is important for online instructors (Schmidt et al., 2016)

13

Research Questions

Finding out why students drop out was retrieved from the study participants with research questions that follow.

- RQ1: What are online faculty perspectives regarding why some online students drop out of online courses at the study site?

- RQ2: What are the perspectives of online students regarding why they drop out of online courses at the study site?

- RQ3: What are online faculty and online student recommendations for improving retention in online courses?

14

Findings

Skill Level of the Student

- Students who attempt online courses without academic technology skills have difficulty from the very beginning of the course.

15

Findings

External Student Issues

- Most online students enroll in remote courses for the convenience. However, external issues, such as family commitments, work obligations, and finances frequently influence academic performance and persistence.

16

Study Findings

Time Management

- If the student is not proactive in working on assignments and reaching out to the instructor, they are liable to become overwhelmed and frequently drop out of the course.

17

Findings

Time Management Issues

- Frequently students are not aware of the time required to successfully complete an online course. They presume they have the time and knowledge.
- Many students expect online classes to be the same as face-to-face classes

18

Findings

Lack of Communication with the Instructor

Remote learners are more prone to attrition because of the lack of interaction with other students and faculty members.

19

Findings

Course Content

There are certain subjects for which you need to be in-person to have an instructor in front of you to give feedback and correct errors that will put you back on track. For example, if you are taking a math course.

20

Findings

Ease of Navigation

- The design and layout of the LMS is one of the most important elements in the successful completion of an online course. The LMS impacts the way the online course is accessed and perceived. Course navigation must be intuitive.
-

21

Findings

Qualities of a Successful Online Student

- The online student personal characteristics that are directly connected to course persistence include their academic experiences, their level of motivation, their demographics, their personality, and their support network.

22

Impact

- Instructors must realize they have the ability to make a positive impact on student attrition by making simple adjustments in the course design, interaction, and communication with their online students.

23

Case Study

- On your laptops review case study:

  Retention in Online Courses: Exploring Issues and Solutions—
  A Literature Review

  Retention in Online Courses Exploring.pdf

24

Best Practices

- **What are your best practices?**

- Step 1: Make a list of your best practices for retaining students in your online courses.

- Step 2: Share your list with as many people as you can within a 15-minute timeframe. If you hear something new or interesting, add it to your list.

- Debrief

25

Try Something New

- In your packet make a list of 5 things you are willing to commit to doing to retain your online students.

- At your tables share 1 strategy and how you plan to use it.

- Debrief

26

What do you need?

- Make a list of things you might need to implement your plan.

- Discuss at your tables.

- Debrief

27

Questions?

- Any questions or comments?

28

Training Evaluation

- Before you leave, please complete an evaluation about the training you received.

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Formative Evaluation Questions for Professional Collogues

Questions:

1.   Is the information clear?

2.   If not, what needs to be clarified?

3.   Is the material engaging?

4.   Any suggestions for making the information more engaging?

5.   What are your thoughts about the activities?

6.   Any recommendations for additional activities?

7.   Based on your experiences, what do you think is missing?

8.   Is there anything that needs to be expounded upon?

9.   What did you like best?

10.   What did you like least?

11.   Is there anything you would like to ask?

Professional Development Training Evaluation for Attendees

1.   What department do you work in?

2.   How long have you taught online?

3.   What did you find interesting or useful?

4.   Which strategy to you plan to implement?

5.   Any recommendations for future training about online retention?

6.   Is there anything you would like to add about the training or the topic of online

retention?

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. I am a doctoral student at

Walden University and not acting in my position at the college. The purpose of this basic

qualitative study is to explore online faculty and online student perspectives regarding

why students drop out of online courses at one state college and online faculty and online

students' recommendations for improving online retention. Possible risks of participating

in this study could include possible anxiety-related to experiences discussed during the

interview. This study will consist of open-ended questions and last approximately 45 to

60 minutes. To protect your privacy, personal information, such as name, campus, etc.

will be kept confidential.

The information collected will possibility improve the online learning experience

for students in the future. Your involvement is completely voluntary, and you have the

right to opt-out of the study at any time. Please be reassured you will not be penalized for

not participating or for your responses to any of the questions.

<u>Interview Protocol for Faculty</u>

Background Questions:

1.   How long have you been teaching?

2.   How many online courses have you taught?

3.   What department do you teach in?

4.   What training have you taken for teaching online?

Interview:

1. Based on your experiences, what are the reasons students drop out of online courses?

2. What components of the class or online experience may contribute to a student dropping out of class?

3. What outside factors do you feel influence a student decision to drop out?

4. Do students usually notify you if they plan to drop out of an online course? If so, what steps do you take to assist them?

5. How do you provide outreach to students?

6. What techniques have you used to assist with student persistence in an online class?

7. What recommendations do you suggest for ways faculty can positively influence a student decision to drop out of or remain in an online course?

<u>Interview Protocol for Students</u>

Background Questions:

1.   How many online classes have you taken?

2.   Of those, how many online classes have you completed?

Interview:

1. Based on your experiences, why do students drop out of online courses?

2. Were there elements in the contents of the course(s) that contributed to your dropping out of any online course? If yes, what were they?

3. Were there concerns/constraints outside of the class that contributed to the outcome? If yes, what were they?

4. Did you retake the course and, if so, were you successful the second time? If so, what was different?

5. If you did not retake the course, why not?

6. What might an instructor do to assist you to stay in the online course?

7. What suggestions do you have for making online instruction better?